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MISS WENTWORTH'S IDEA

WORKS BY W. E. NORRIS

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MISS WENTWORTH'S IDEA

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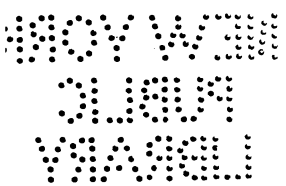

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MISS WENTWORTH'S IDEA.

CHAPTER I.

One dark afternoon, in the depth of the dark and dreary London winter, Miss Wentworth was toasting her toes before the drawing-room fire of her brother's house in Upper Brook Street, which was also her house, inasmuch as it was her home, and as she paid the half of the rent, rates and taxes due in respect thereof. There were plenty of people who admired Miss Wentworth immensely; and although her nose was certainly too short, and her mouth rather too large, it cannot be said that their admiration was misplaced. For she had that look of breeding which is more than a sufficient substitute for beauty; added to which, her large gray eyes placed her above any need for substitutes. The possession of iron-gray eyes and long dark eyelashes should be enough to meet all ordinary requirements, and if Miss Wentworth's requirements were not ordinary, that was only because, like the generality of us, she did not know when she was well off.

At this moment the expression of her face denoted weariness and dissatisfaction. It may be conceded that she was too rich and too good-looking to be dissatisfied; but perhaps she had some right to be weary, since she was doing nothing, and of all methods of killing time that is, no doubt, the most wearisome. On the other hand, she might have pleaded that she was doing nothing for the excellent reason that she had nothing to do. The

dinner had been ordered long ago; she had paid some visits, she had written a few letters, she had just had her tea, and if there was any better way of spending the next three hours than gazing at the fire and wishing she was somebody else, it was her misfortune to be unacquainted with it. The afternoon post had brought her half a dozen notes of a more or less uninteresting description, and these lay upon the tea-table beside her, with the exception of the last that she had chanced to open, which she was still holding between her finger and thumb. It was merely a printed intimation, indorsed with the compliments of the vicar of the parish, to the effect that the Rev. the Hon. Ernest Compton would preach on the following evening on behalf of the Society of St. Francis, the good work of which was necessarily restricted owing to lack of funds.

Miss Wentworth was idly wondering what was meant by the Society of St. Francis, who its reverend and honorable supporter might be, and whether he was likely, in the course of his sermon, to supply any fresh notions to a young woman who was quite as urgently in need of a mission in life as he could be of money, when the butler announced "Lady Morecambe."

"You, of all people!" she exclaimed, starting up and embracing the very smartly dressed little lady who bore that title. "What in the world has brought you up to London, Harriet?"

Lady Morecambe was no longer very young, and had never been very pretty; yet the general effect of her was a near approach to prettiness. Perhaps she or her dressmaker knew how to make the most of her charms; perhaps, now that her hair was streaked with gray, she had reached an age at which regularity of feature ceases to be a matter of importance; or perhaps her bright, alert little face would have been pleasant to look upon at any time of life.

"Oh, shopping," she said, in answer to Miss Wentworth's question. "I don't know how it is that whenever I find it absolutely essential to buy a score of things it is sure to be on a Saturday. However, I have contrived to get through all my jobs this time by rising long be-

fore the lark and coming up by the early express; and now, if you please, I should like a cup of tea."

"Of course you shall have your tea," answered Miss Wentworth, ringing the bell; "but how about dinner? And at what hour do you expect to reach home again?"

"Good gracious me! you don't suppose I am going back to-night, do you? I have arranged a little party to dine somewhere or other this evening, and go to the theatre afterwards, and to-morrow I propose to spend a quiet Sunday all by myself in Eaton Square. The one great advantage of having a London house is that it gives one an excuse for running up like this every now and then."

"Well," remarked Miss Wentworth, laughing, "you are a tolerably unceremonious kind of hostess, I must say! What about the large party that you have left at Morecambe? And what about Sylvia, who is supposed to be under your especial care?"

"Sylvia will be all right," answered Lady Morecambe; "you needn't distress yourself about her. There are lots of old women in the house who will feel it their duty to keep a stern eye upon her in my absence, and see that she doesn't get into mischief. As for my other guests, Morecambe is quite capable of looking after them. They were kind enough to say with one consent that they would gladly excuse me when I told them I wanted to pay a flying visit to London in order to hear Ernest Compton preach."

"You said you had come up to do shopping. But who is this Mr. Compton, and what does he mean by his Society of St. Francis? I have just had a notice about him from my vicar."

"The idea of a churchy person like you never having heard of Ernest Compton! Well, my dear, he is simply the finest preacher living, and so you will think when you have listened to him. We'll go to church together to-morrow evening, and if he doesn't make you resolve to renounce the pomps and vanities of this wicked world forthwith I shall be very much surprised. He invariably produces that effect upon me, I know."

"Still, you don't seem to have done it yet."

"Well, no; because, you see, *la nuit porte conseil*, and

MISS WENTWORTH'S IDEA

CHAPTER II.

When Miss Wentworth reached home she went straight into her brother's study; for she felt that she owed him an apology. Mr. Wentworth did not object to dining occasionally at his club; but he objected very strongly to dining alone, and as she had unfortunately forgotten to tell him that she was going to church that evening, she had been obliged to leave a note for him, announcing her intention.

"I hope you have had your dinner all right, James," she said.

"As it is now nearly a quarter-past nine," answered the sandy-haired, middle-aged man who was smoking his cigar in an easy-chair before the fire, "I need hardly tell you that I have had my dinner. I believe it was more or less all right, although I do wish that your cook had the same love for new ideas as you have. But perhaps that would be rather too much to expect. Well, how did you like the Anglican monk?"

"He isn't a monk," answered Miss Wentworth, advancing to the fireside and drawing off her gloves; "he looked just like any other parson. But he didn't talk like the others. Oh, James, he was magnificent! I wish you could have heard him!"

"If he is magnificent, I wish I could, and if he will come here some day and preach to me I shall be delighted to listen to anything that he may have to say; but never yet have I met a parson who could draw me to such an abominably uncomfortable thing as an evening service."

"You wouldn't have thought about that; you wouldn't have known whether you were comfortable or not. At least, he would have given you such mental discomfort that you would have forgotten everything else."

"Ah, I don't like mental discomfort," observed Mr.

Wentworth, tranquilly; "you, of course, do. *Des gouts et des couleurs!* I've heard all about the man, you know. He has started some kind of self-denying Order, with vows of poverty and celibacy and all the rest of it, and he has chucked every penny that he possesses into his scheme. Admirable; but, shall we say a trifle asinine? Because, you see, that sort of thing is quite out of date and can't last."

"I don't see it at all," Miss Wentworth declared

"No, you wouldn't. Well, so long as it amuses you and the other ladies, and so long as you don't go the length of parting with all your worldly goods for an idea, your monk serves his purpose, no doubt. I can well imagine how edified Lady Morecambe must be by him."

Mr. Wentworth laughed softly to himself as he watched the smoke from his cigar rising towards the ceiling. It was his habit to laugh at most people and things, and he had always found that this mental attitude of his kept him in tolerably good health and spirits. He was only Muriel Wentworth's half-brother, and was more than twenty years older than she. He was also, although a well-to-do man, considerably poorer; for his stepmother, who had had a large fortune, had bequeathed the whole of it to her only child. As this lady had died about the same time that he himself had been left a widower, it had seemed natural that Muriel should make her home with him, and he had very cordially agreed to that arrangement. For one thing, it was lucrative, because she could very well afford to defray half the expenses of the household and the cost of a carriage; and for another, it ensured him the services of a tolerably experienced housekeeper, which his daughter Sylvia, who was only just out of the schoolroom, could have no pretension to be. The only trouble was the probability, which might almost be regarded as a certainty, that Muriel would, ere long, marry somebody or other.

Muriel, however, notwithstanding certain advantageous offers, had not as yet seen fit to marry anybody; and if she appeared to be as satisfied with the existing state of things as Mr. Wentworth was, that was only because she was of a somewhat reticent temperament.

In reality she was thoroughly dissatisfied. She had not that intense craving for the pleasures of this life which is common among young people, and she was perhaps rather abnormally alive to its duties and responsibilities. It was a duty, of course, to look after her brother's servants for him and to study cookery-books on his behalf; it was also a duty to act in some sort of way as a mother to Sylvia; who was disposed to be wilful and imprudent in her dealings with young men; but these things did not quite suffice to fulfil the requirements of a modest ambition. There was no lack of good-natured matrons, such as Lady Morecambe, at whose country house the girl was now staying, to chaperon Sylvia; while as for James, nothing was more likely than that he would some day take to himself a second wife. Muriel Wentworth wanted to be of some service to humanity at large; she could not believe that she had been created for the sole purpose of ordering the dinner and the carriage, and she was unable, upon mature reflection, to see why the fact of Mr. Compton's being a gentleman should preclude him from accepting at least a part of the money which she did not know how to spend, and providing her, in return, with the occupation of which she stood so sorely in need.

On the following morning, therefore, she summoned up courage to write a long letter to the preacher whose eloquence had so profoundly impressed her. She laid her case before him, she explained what her wishes were, and she begged him to take her word for it that she was not acting upon the mere impulse of the moment. She was not, she admitted, free from all doubt as to the manner in which she ought to dispose of her money, but she thought that the obstacles which seemed to stand in the way of her devoting it to charitable purposes were not insuperable. In any case, she had no one whose advice she could ask upon such a subject, and she ventured to hope that he would not refuse her his. Could he find time to come and see her any afternoon after five o'clock?

It was not without trepidation that she posted this appeal to a total stranger; yet when she remembered the

kindly and sympathetic inflections which his voice had taken during certain passages of his discourse, she felt sure that he would understand what she had not expressed so well as she could have wished, and that he would give her an opportunity of stating her views with more precision by word of mouth. Had she been better acquainted with Mr. Compton she would have known that it was a very common thing with him to receive letters from ladies who had been moved to repentance by his sermons, and that such experiences were not greatly to his taste. Not being aware of this, she felt a good deal snubbed when the following rather curt and formal reply reached her by return of post:—

"MADAM,—I am much occupied just now; but I will endeavor to call on you upon Thursday next, as you request, at the hour which you mention.

"Faithfully yours,

"ERNEST COMPTON."

Well, of course these few cold words made her wish that she had been less precipitate and less confidential; perhaps also—for human nature is weak—they may have made her wish for a chance of retaliating upon her reverend and honorable correspondent. But in any case it was evident that she could not now draw back; nor, in truth, after calm consideration, did she desire to do so. After all, he was entitled to doubt her sincerity; it was for her to convince him that she was both serious and resolute. This she quite hoped that she would be able to do; so she carefully rehearsed in advance the conversation which she intended to hold with him, and received him in a composed and self-possessed manner when he duly made his appearance at the appointed hour.

He, on his side, was perfectly at his ease. He shook hands, accepted her offer of a cup of tea, and began to talk commonplaces just like any ordinary visitor. Once or twice, to be sure, she found those searching black eyes of his fixed upon her; but apparently they did not dis-

cover anything interesting, for he continued to speak about Lady Morecambe and the county ball which she was about to patronize, as though such topics were the ones most likely to suit his companion. It was not without difficulty, and not until he had been sitting beside her for a quarter of an hour, that Muriel contrived to drag St. Francis of Assisi in by the head and shoulders.

"Oh, well," said Mr. Compton, laughing half-apologetically, "a Society must have some name, you know, and it so happens that of all the saints St. Francis of Assisi is the one for whom I have the greatest personal veneration. I think, too that we may describe ourselves as to some extent following in his footsteps. We see, at any rate, what nobody can help seeing, that after nineteen centuries Christianity has failed to establish itself as the religion of the world, and we hold, rightly or wrongly, that this is because the world has never really practiced Christianity. We neither pretend nor expect to revolutionize society; only we think it incumbent upon us to make our own microscopic efforts in what we believe to be the right direction. For the rest, our charitable work is such as you or any other outsider may safely subscribe to. It is not necessary to be a Christian in order to recognize the duty of clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and visiting the sick."

"But I don't want to be an outsider; I want to join you," Muriel declared boldly. "I fully agree with you that Christianity has never had a fair trial; I don't believe that criminals ought to be punished, or that war ought to exist, or that a few of us ought to be rich while the enormous majority are poor; and I wish, if you will allow me, to give myself and such money as I have in aid of what you call your microscopic efforts."

"Oh, but I'm afraid I can't allow you," answered Mr. Compton, shaking his head and laughing again; "we don't accept recruits like that from one moment to another. You have read Tolstoi, perhaps?"

"Well, yes," Muriel confessed a little reluctantly; "why do you ask?"

"I thought it not improbable that you had. Tolstoi may fairly claim to be respected; but as for imitating

him, that is another affair! One must make sure, in the first place, that one has the courage of one's opinions; and, in the second, that one is quite free to act upon them. I gathered from your letter that you did not consider yourself wholly free from family obligations."

"The question is whether the obligations are real or not, and that is just what I wished to consult you about. My half brother, as I told you, is a widower who may marry again; in anticipation of that I should like to make some provision for my niece, and I suppose I could do so, could I not? Even then I should not come to you by any means empty-handed."

"Oh, we should be satisfied with the residue of your fortune, Miss Wentworth. But don't you think it possible that you have duties ready to your hand which may very well content you for some years to come? And don't you—pardon me—think that you may look at the world from an altogether different point of view a few years hence?"

"I think," answered Muriel, "that I am old enough to know my own mind; but of course I understand your feeling conscientiously bound to throw cold water over me. I must try to persuade you that that is not necessary and that I am not exactly the hysterical young woman whom you evidently take me for."

She tried accordingly, and if she was not absolutely convincing, she was at least earnest and honest. For so much Mr. Compton probably gave her credit, for it was in a graver and kindlier tone than he had hitherto adopted that he delivered the judgment for which she paused.

"My dear young lady," said he, "I doubt neither your zeal nor your convictions; but I am sure your own good sense will tell you how impossible it would be for me to take your money at present, except in the form of some comparatively trifling annual subscription. To put it upon no higher grounds, I really cannot afford to rob you. What would the newspapers say about me and my unhappy Society if it transpired that we had induced a very young lady with very large means to join us?"

"And yet you talk of having the courage of your opinions! Is one to be deterred from doing what is right by fear of ignorant gossip or slander?"

"Oh, I hope not; but you see, Miss Wentworth, it hasn't exactly been proved to demonstration that you would be right in giving us all your possessions or that we should be right in taking them. And since it is our aim to influence public opinion as far as our abilities will allow us to do so, we must need show a little respect for it. However, as I said before, we won't refuse a small subscription."

Muriel bit her lips. "It seems to me," said she, "that, considering what your professions are, you are singularly selfish. Of course I will gladly give you a subscription; but you know very well that permission to become a subscriber was not what I asked you for. I subscribe to plenty of charities already, and I could easily subscribe to plenty more. What I want is personal employment in the service of my fellow-creatures, and that you won't give me, because you are afraid lest people should accuse you of greed or undue influence, or something of that kind."

"I daresay I can find employment for you, if you wish it," answered Mr. Compton, "although I should think you ought to have no difficulty in finding it for yourself. As regards the charge of selfishness, surely—supposing that I were rude enough to do such a thing—I might retort *tu quoque!* Why are you so eager to throw yourself and your fortune at the heads of your fellow-creatures? Is it altogether out of a disinterested love for them?"

Muriel was angry and offended; but she flattered herself that self-control enabled her to conceal these emotions. "You don't believe in me yet," she observed quietly; "perhaps you will believe in me some day. I am sorry that you should be so sceptical; but I daresay experience has made you so." She could not help adding, "I wish you were a little bit more like your sermons!"

He smiled, and said that that was a species of criticism to which all preachers were inured; it was necessary to

use one kind of language to a mixed assembly and another to individuals. He could only assure her that it would give him great pleasure if he were able to assist or advise her in any practical way.

Miss Wentworth was afraid that practical counsels would be of very little comfort to her. Not being an absolute idiot she was aware that she could follow the precepts of the Church Catechism, live respected, and die more or less lamented; but unhappily that scheme of life did not happen to realize her ideal. Still she was grateful to Mr. Compton for having sacrificed so much of his valuable time to her, and she hoped that their acquaintance would not cease then and there.

If she thought that that little display of dignified ill-temper would take her mentor down a peg or two, she was disappointed. Mr. Compton said what was polite and conventional, and, after thanking her for the bank-notes which she handed to him, withdrew, leaving her with tears of anger as well as of vexation in her eyes. She was very sorry that she had been so silly as to send for him; she was still more sorry that he should have shown so evident an appreciation of her silliness; yet, though silenced, she was not discouraged, and she registered an inward vow that Mr. Compton should understand her a little better before he had done with her.

Meanwhile, it was time for her to go and dress for a dinner-party to which she and her brother had been bidden.

If there was one form of entertainment which Mr. Wentworth liked and Muriel disliked more than another, it was a dinner-party. Their requirements probably were not the same, and doubtless his were more easily fulfilled than hers. It was, therefore, with the confident expectation of spending three hours of unrelieved weariness that Miss Wentworth seated herself in the brougham beside her brother, who remarked cheerfully:

"We shall have some fun this evening."

"Fun!" she ejaculated; "why should you anticipate that of all things in the world?"

"Because we are going to meet Mrs. Hill. Doesn't Mrs. Hill amuse you?"

"Well, not very much," Muriel confessed.

"Ah, poor you! I suppose not. What a lot of innocent amusement you are deprived of by your morose temperament! You really should try to acquire the knack of being diverted by people who don't mean to be diverting. Believe me, you will find it a solace with advancing years."

"After all, poor Mrs. Hill is a thoroughly kind-hearted woman," Muriel remarked, somewhat inconsequently.

"Who denies the kindness of her heart? Nevertheless, she amuses me without intending it, and so—with the highest possible respect for you—do you, my dear. But then I am a simple creature: it doesn't take a great deal to make me laugh. I would have given a good deal to be present at your interview with your monastic friend this afternoon."

"How did you know that I had had an interview with him?" inquired Muriel, glad that the darkness concealed her heightened color; for in truth she was rather more sensitive to ridicule than enthusiastic persons ought to be.

"I made so bold as to ask Hopkins whether anybody had called, and he told me that the Reverend Compton had been having tea with you. Did he come up to your expectations?"

"Oh, yes, thank you; and, if you had been there, I don't think you would have found much to laugh at in him. He takes a very sensible, commonplace view of life."

"How funny of him! I suppose he must have thought that you stood in need of a corrective. Well, I trust you may be led into dinner to-night by somebody equally interesting."

"There is not the faintest hope of that," answered Muriel, with a sigh.

CHAPTER III.

ONE advantage which a London dinner party possesses over a provincial one is that at the former you never can tell whom you may meet, whereas at the latter there is seldom room for any uncertainty upon the subject. And so a little surprise was in store for Miss Wentworth, who certainly had not expected, on entering the drawing-room, to recognize Mr. Compton among the dozen or so of guests assembled there. But there was no mistaking the gray-headed cleric, and he at once greeted her with a smile and an outstretched hand.

"How very odd that we should meet twice in one day, although we have never met before!" she exclaimed. "I should have thought you would have disdained such frivolous entertainments as this."

"Why?" he asked.

She could not think of any adequate reply, and was conscious of having said a stupid and, perhaps, a rather impertinent thing, through sheer lack of sufficient presence of mind to hold her tongue, but he did not seem to notice her embarrassment.

"I know no reason why one shouldn't dine with one's friends if one has the time," he remarked, after a short pause. "I don't often dine out, because I haven't the time; but I am here this evening in discharge of what may almost be counted as coming into the category of professional duties. Our hostess gives me a good deal of money, and she expects me, in return, to show myself at her house every now and then. That is a kind of sacrifice which can be made cheerfully enough."

"Yes," agreed Muriel, hesitatingly; "but isn't it a little undignified."

"Oh, I am quite prepared to sacrifice my dignity, such as it is," he answered, laughing. "Perhaps I did that

when I laid myself out to be a popular preacher; but, as you may imagine, I acted from motives which appeared to me to be sufficient. Like a certain famous author, *Je prends mon bien ou je le trouve;* I knew from the first that I should not be able to pick and choose."

His tone jarred upon her a little; he seemed determined to exhibit himself to her as less of a hero than her fancy had painted him, and she could not understand why he should be so perverse. Surely it was beneath him to show himself at dinner-parties as a lion, and—as he had half hinted was the case—to resort to oratorical persuasion, which was not spontaneous, in order to obtain money. But she was unable, though not unwilling, to say this to him; for other lady admirers of his were present who claimed his attention, and she was disappointed of her hope that he might be assigned to her as a neighbor at the dinner-table. In his stead she was awarded to a certain Colonel Medhurst, who was introduced to her at the last moment, and whom she mentally classified, after a brief scrutiny, as a middle-aged military man of the stereotyped, dull pattern.

Colonel Medhurst was certainly middle-aged, inasmuch as he had passed that fortieth year from which the down-hill road of life may be said to begin; but he was tall, broad-shouldered and straight-backed; his blue eyes were as clear as a boy's, and his closely-cut brown hair had as yet no threads of gray in it. Every profession leaves its recognizable stamp upon those who have followed it for twenty years, so that the outward appearance of the man was, no doubt, of the stereotyped cavalry pattern; yet his conversation could not fairly be called dull, as even the fastidious Miss Wentworth had to admit after five minutes. He had just returned from India, he told her, and, owing to various causes, had been away from England for quite an eternity.

"So that I feel as if I were in a strange land," he said, "and everything strikes me as being queer and strange. People's houses aren't in the least like what they used to be; nor are their dinners; nor are they themselves, for the matter of that."

"Improved or deteriorated?" inquired Muriel.

"The furniture has improved, and so have the dinners; I don't think I am quite so sure about the people. They aren't shy, which I suppose must be counted as an advance, and they are certainly better informed than their predecessors; only I fancy they are a good deal less domestic than they were in the days of my youth, and that seems to me to be a pity. Of course, I am speaking of the women."

"Oh, yes, that is a matter of course; one knows that when a man sets to work to criticise the world, it is always the other sex that he falls foul of. You have a comfortable theory that society is what women choose to make it."

"Well, but isn't that a correct theory?" asked Colonel Medhurst.

"No, I don't think so. Women, as a rule, wish to please you, so they suit themselves to what they imagine to be your tastes. You will hardly go so far as to assert that you ever think of suiting yourselves to ours."

The Colonel, after pondering for a moment, replied that he really couldn't say; he should think that some men did. "But, you see, it isn't such an easy matter to discover what your tastes are. It is evident enough that you like excitement; but whether you like all the other things that you appear to like seems doubtful. By the way, I saw you in church last Sunday evening, listening to my friend Compton."

"Is Mr. Compton a friend of yours?" asked Muriel, with quickened interest.

"In a certain sense he is, because we were great friends at school; but we have scarcely seen each other since those far-away days; and, although he tells me I am just what I always was, I can't return the compliment. I daresay you will hardly believe it, but Compton was a rather naughty boy."

"I can quite believe it; I don't like good boys," Muriel declared.

"Perhaps you like good men, though, and if Compton isn't a good man I never met one. I won't take upon myself to say that he is wise. Do you know that he was very well off, and that he has given up every penny to this precious Society of his?"

"If that is a foolish thing to do, you will admit at least that it is consistent."

"Certainly it is, and he worth a thousand of the rest of us. But is this eccentric Society worth the sacrifice of his life and his fortune, and his prospects? 'Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor,' is what the Roman Catholics call a counsel of perfection; if we all followed it the business of the world would come to a standstill."

"There is no danger of our all following it; and he doesn't suggest that we should."

"Oh! I thought he did."

"No; he seems to think that the privilege of being a Christian in reality as well as in name is reserved for the few. And I only wish I were one of the few," added Muriel, sighing.

Colonel Medhurst turned his head so as to study his neighbor's features, and apparently he found the study an agreeable one, for he fairly stared her out of countenance.

"Aren't you one of them?" he inquired at length.

"I am not," she answered, "and I doubt whether I shall ever be allowed to be. Mr. Compton thinks, as I am sure you would if you knew me a little better, that I am only a discontented sort of woman, who doesn't know what she wants, and he would no more dream of admitting me into the Society of St. Francis than he would dream of admitting you."

"I don't think he will be requested to admit me, and I hope he will never be requested to admit you, Miss Wentworth. Dear me, you can surely find something better to do with yourself than to become a nun or a Sister of Charity."

"Most people would say so, of course. The popular notion is that Sisters of Charity should be old maids, and poor and ugly; and we don't believe enough in our religion to give up anything to it, except what we don't want or can't have. But that isn't Mr. Compton's notion, and it isn't mine—if he would only give me credit for having notions worthy of consideration."

"Oh, you have consulted him, then?" Colonel Medhurst began; but at this moment Muriel had to respond

to some remark make by the gentleman who sat on the other side of her, and it was not until dinner was nearly over that he was able to speak to her again.

He re-opened the conversation by asking whether the man opposite with the fair hair and the short, grayish beard wasn't her father.

"I am glad you didn't put that question to him," answered Muriel, "because he wouldn't have liked it. James is my half-brother, and we live together, and I have a niece who is not very many years younger than I am."

"So that he might be your father, after all."

"It would be just possible; but the suggestion isn't exactly a compliment to him."

"Well, I apologize. And what is the name of the fat lady with the diamonds who is making him laugh so much?"

"She is a Mrs. Hill, and I wish he wouldn't laugh at her quite so unrestrainedly. James has an unfortunate conviction that the people whom he laughs at never by any chance detect him. Sometimes he says things to them that make my blood run cold."

Colonel Medhurst observed gravely that irony was a dangerous weapon. Indeed, he thought so, and had never been able to draw any distinction between satire and ill-nature. Himself a very simple and straightforward person, he valued simplicity and straightforwardness in others. Therefore he did not think he should like Mr. Wentworth, and was quite sure he liked that gentleman's sister, though her opinion probably did not altogether coincide with his own. He would have tried to elicit a few more of her opinions from her, if the ladies had not risen before he had time to begin, and he thought a great deal about her after their departure.

She, for her part, was not equally flattering to him. Colonel Medhurst seemed to be a pleasant, masculine kind of man; but he obviously belonged to a class of persons with whom she felt little sympathy, and she dismissed him from her mind the moment that she turned her back upon him.

The fat lady with the diamonds made for her, as she entered the drawing room, and led her away into a corner, holding her by the hand, and saying—

"My dear Muriel, I want to tell you my news, which I have just been telling to your brother. What do you think? Johnny has been asked to stay with Lord and Lady Morecambe, and he has gone down there this afternoon."

"Yes?" answered Muriel abstractedly; for the confidences of Mrs. Hill seldom interested her.

"Yes, indeed, and I am so glad about it. Isn't it odd that they should have invited Johnny Hill at all?" but of course she did not give utterance to that reflection.

"I am glad poor Johnny will have somebody he knows to talk to there," she remarked, which comment was only a shade less offensive than her unspoken one.

Mrs. Hill tossed her head. It was a little round head, adorned with little round features, so that it did not bear tossing particularly well. To be effective that kind of gesture requires a hook nose. She said in an affronted tone:

"I can assure you that wherever Johnny goes he meets plenty of people who are willing enough to talk to him. You have known him since his boyhood, and perhaps that is why you don't quite realize that he is now a man. Sylvia realizes it, though."

Muriel gazed at her companion in undisguised amazement. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"If you don't know, my dear, you had better ask your brother. He was not in the least surprised when I told him that I had noticed the young people's liking for one another. He said he had noticed it himself; and so I feel pretty sure Lady Morcambe must have done. Considering how kind she has been to Johnny, do you think I might call upon Lady Morecambe, when she comes up to London? I was introduced to her once at your house, you know."

"Perhaps it might be better to let her make the first advance," answered Muriel, successfully suppressing an inclination to laugh.

"Well, if you think so—although I feel as if I ought to thank her for having been such a good friend to Johnny. He is rather needlessly diffident, poor boy; but I think dear Sylvia will forgive him for that, don't you? Nowadays young men are so very seldom given to undervaluing themselves."

Muriel willingly expressed her disapproval of the modern young man. She could not possibly say that she considered Johnny Hill's diffidence misplaced, and she inwardly resolved to scold her niece for having given any encouragement to a ridiculous hobbledehoy. Sylvia often deserved a scolding, and sometimes took it in good part; as for James, he was incorrigible. Of course he had found it amusing to flatter this silly and vulgar woman with hopes of a match which he could never sanction, and of course he would not be in the least ashamed of himself if it were pointed out to him that he had no business to do any such thing.

But what was not a little surprising was that Mr. Wentworth, when taken to task upon the subject, declined to admit that he had been diverting himself at Mrs. Hill's expense. He took Muriel away almost immediately after he and the other men had come upstairs from the dining-room, so that she had no opportunity of saying anything, except good-bye, to Mr. Compton, and as soon as they were once more in the brougham he checked her remonstrances by declaring that, in his opinion, Johnny Hill was quite as desirable a son-in-law as another.

"Indeed he is a good deal more desirable than most of them, if you come to that. I suppose he must have at least £5,000 a year of his own, and most likely he will have as much again when his mother dies."

"You only talk like that because you know that it disgusts me, James. You can't suppose for one moment that Sylvia would marry such a booby."

"In the course of a tolerably long and uninterruptedly virtuous life," answered Mr. Wentworth, composedly, "I have known many instances of charming women having married absolute boobies, and I am bound to say that none of them appeared to regret what they had done. If there is one character more than another in which a booby is especially qualified to shine, I suppose it is that of a husband. He is easily pleased, easily pacified, and easily deceived: what more would you have? If, in addition to his other advantages, the booby possesses a large income, he is about as near perfection as

anything that one can hope to secure in this wicked world."

"Fortunately, Sylvia won't dream of taking him," observed Muriel, disdaining to make any reply to these cynical sentiments.

"Oh, well, if she won't, she won't; only don't accuse me of having trifled with Mrs. Hill's maternal solicitude. I can lay my hand upon the front of my shirt and say that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to hear that Sylvia had done so well for herself."

"Then you don't deserve to have a daughter, and you have no sort of natural affection."

"Thank you, my dear; the same to you. You are rich, while Sylvia and I are, comparatively speaking, poor; and charity, as I have always been taught, begins at home. I don't expect you to hand over your fortune to us, but when you contemplate casting the whole of it into the lap of the successor of St. Francis, I do feel that natural affection is not precisely your strongest point."

This thrust had the effect of silencing Muriel, who could not but acknowledge it to be merited. She did not deem it incumbent upon her to explain that she by no means ignored the claims of her family, and that, if she ever joined the Society of St. Francis, it would only be after the fashion of a modern Sapphira.

Meanwhile, Mr. Compton and Colonel Medhurst were walking away together, and the latter was delivering himself of some trenchant criticisms upon the sermon by which certain other persons had been so profoundly impressed.

"It's all very fine, Compton," he was saying, "but there's an unreality about this gospel of yours which rather puts me off. You preach what you don't and can't practice."

"Do I?" asked the other.

"Well, perhaps I have no right to say that; of course I can't know for certain. But this literal forgiving of one's enemies, for instance—how could you reduce such a theory to practice? You'll allow, I take it, that a soldier is bound to fight for his country?"

"Yes, as matters stand at present; but we think that matters stand very badly at present. We should like

to see soldiers and all need for soldiers done away with. We might as well say that we should like to see sin and pain and sorrow done away with, you may answer. Quite so; but our feebleness doesn't excuse us from working towards an end which we can't hope to achieve in full, and at any rate it is well within our power to forgive our personal enemies."

"I don't believe it is within my power to forgive mine," said Medhurst rather grimly. "At least, there is one man whom it would be nonsense for me to talk about forgiving. I suppose you can guess his name."

"No," answered Compton wonderingly; "how should I know?"

"Well, I thought everybody knew; but I dare say everybody forgets very quickly, and perhaps you can employ your time better than in reading the newspapers. The man whom I mean is my sister's husband, or rather he was her husband until she was compelled to divorce him. Most likely you, with your High Church notions, refuse to recognize such a thing as divorce; yet you would have to acknowledge that, if ever divorce is justifiable, it was so in her case. She bore with him as long as it was possible to bear with him; she only appealed to the law after he had actually struck her more than once. She never told me a word about it until it was too late for me to interfere; I was away in India at the time, and I suppose, as she says, my coming home and hammering the brute wouldn't have done much good. Now that I have come home, I find her a miserable, lonely woman, leading a miserable, lonely life through no fault of her own, and still—that's the horrible part of it—secretly worshipping the blackguard to whom it was no punishment at all to be set free from her. You may tell me, if you like, that I am bound to forgive that blackguard; all I can say in reply is that if you are a mortal man, *you* wouldn't forgive him."

"I can't tell," answered the other, after a few moments of silence; "nobody can tell what his capacities are until he has been put to the test. But this much I can say for certain: unless I could forgive such a man from my heart, it wouldn't be possible for me to say my prayers to-night.

One reservation, you see, is fatal to the whole scheme of the religion that we profess. It is easy to forgive some people, and immensely difficult to forgive others; we must take the rough with the smooth or else acknowledge ourselves beaten."

"If that is so, I acknowledge myself beaten," said Medhurst, curtly.

Mr. Compton did not insist; perhaps he was too experienced a student of his fellow-men to do that.

They marched on, side by side, for some little distance without exchanging another word, and then Medhurst resumed in an altered tone:

"I liked that Miss Wentworth whom I took in to dinner. She is a very pretty girl, and, I should think, as good as she is pretty. A great admirer of yours too, by the way."

"I hope you are not smitten with her," said his friend.

"At my age?—hardly! All the same, I have no doubt I should be if I were twenty years younger. She gave me to understand that you had rather sat upon her; and although, for her sake, I wasn't very sorry to hear that, I don't know how you can have reconciled it with your conscience to drive away such a promising aspirant. What is your objection to her?"

"I am scarcely acquainted with her. I met her for the first time this afternoon; but I saw enough of her then to see that—in short, that she is of no use."

"Well, that is just what she complained of; isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe so. She suffers from a constitutional ailment which is not only very common, but almost incurable. The people who really want to be of use can always find out ways of being useful without making a fuss about it; Miss Wentworth and the rest of her species prefer to make a fuss. She means well, and I dare say she will turn out an excellent wife in some respects, but the chances are that she will always be discontented, so I don't exactly envy her future husband."

"How like a parson!" exclaimed Colonel Medhurst. "You get into the habit of classifying people, and you are as confident in your own judgments as if you were so many swell physicians."

"What else can you expect of us? We haven't the

time to go minutely into individual cases; only we learn to recognize certain symptoms, just as the swell physicians do. They and we are sometimes wrong; but we are much more often right."

"Nevertheless, I shall take the liberty of continuing to think that Miss Wentworth is only discontented because she hasn't yet discovered her mission in life."

"Who contradicts you? The question is whether she will ever discover it. But, as you don't propose to marry her, and as I don't propose to accept her services, the question isn't a particularly important one for either of us."

CHAPTER IV.

PERHAPS, it may be said, without offence to hospitable landowners, that the pleasures of staying in a large country house are somewhat dubious. Setting aside the uneasiness which most of us experience when deprived of our usual occupations and our accustomed playthings, and the misery of coming down to breakfast in the morning, cross and sleepy, to encounter a large assemblage of painfully wide-awake and smartly attired persons, one is seldom free from apprehensions as to the programme of the day's proceedings; and, indeed, it only too often happens that one is either left to one's own devices—in which case one does not know what to do with oneself—or else expected to take part in some form of amusement for which one is peculiarly ill-fitted.

Possibly, however, these are only the ungracious murmurings of middle age. As there never seems to be any difficulty in filling big houses, it must be assumed that a great many people enjoy the kind of existence led there, and certainly Miss Sylvia Wentworth was enjoying herself to the full at Morecambe Priory. Although she passed for being something of a spoilt child, she did not, as a rule, enjoy herself very much at home. Her father did not put himself out of the way to provide diversions for her; her tastes did not accord with Muriel's, and she saw a good deal less of life and the world than she could have wished. Consequently, it was no small treat to her to be taken under the wing of good-natured Lady Morecambe, and to be allowed a glimpse of that section of society which, in some respects, resembles the lilies of the field and Solomon in all his glory. This little golden-haired, blue-eyed girl, whose prettiness was of that fragile order which cannot be expected to outlast many seasons, may have felt instinctively that it behoved her to make

the most of her time. She fretted impatiently over the many wasted days which she was compelled to spend in London, deeming every day wasted that did not bring her entertainment in some shape or form, and resenting the selfishness of those who thus defrauded her of her youth. But at Morecambe Priory it was quite another affair; at Morecambe Priory there was a constant change of visitors, there were great ladies who amused themselves by petting her, and men of all ages who delighted in paying her small attentions; so that it was really only an insignificant annoyance that Johnny Hill should have been invited to join the ranks of the latter.

She was dressed rather early for dinner one evening. and was sitting in the library, awaiting the appearance of the other guests, when Johnny Hill shambled into the room and joined her. He was a tall, loosely-built youth, with a round, foolish face, not unlike his mother's; his hands were large and red, and as he advanced she was struck by his underbred air. That defect was not quite so conspicuous in London, and indeed he was a good enough natured creature with whom she was willing to flirt in the absence of higher game; but the fact was that he was absurdly out of place amid his present surroundings. Sylvia, it must be confessed, was not wholly free from an outsider's ignoble jealousy of other outsiders.

It was in a tone of mingled irritation and patronage that she said:

"Well, Johnny, how do you like yourself here?"

After a moment of reflection, Mr. Hill replied in a deep bass voice:

"I like being anywhere where you are."

"Thank you so very much; I never met anybody who could pay a compliment with quite your grace and delicacy. But as we see each other so constantly in town, perhaps it would be only fair to other people if we were to avoid one another now that we are away for a change. You will be out shooting all day to-morrow, of course."

"Well, I don't know about all day," answered the young man, propping himself up against the mantelpiece and stuffing his hands into his pockets; "I suppose we shall

go out in the morning. Why do you say that we meet constantly in town? It seems to me that you're always engaged when I try to see you."

"Then I can only suppose that you don't try very hard or very frequently, for heaven knows that my engagements are not numerous!"

"I assure you," Mr. Hill declared with energy, "that of late I have been trying every blessed day."

"As often as that? Well, there's nothing like perseverance, and if you go on trying after I return home you are pretty safe to succeed in the long run. Just at present I'm not at home; I'm out for a holiday. Do you understand?"

The poor fellow's powers of comprehension were strictly limited, but he was scarcely dense enough to misunderstand that, although he could think of no appropriate rejoinder. He rubbed the back of his head feebly, and remained silent until the entrance of Lady Morecambe, who was closely followed by several of her guests, relieved him of any further necessity for making himself agreeable. He dropped at once into the background, which seemed to be his natural place, and Sylvia would no doubt have forgotten his existence, had she not been unpleasantly reminded of it about ten minutes later, when he came forward to offer her his arm.

Happily, one always has two neighbors at dinner; but, unhappily, one is not always acquainted with both of them, and Sylvia, on taking her place, deeply regretted that Lady Morecambe had omitted to introduce to her the gentleman who sat upon her right. She regretted it all the more because this newly-arrived guest looked a rather interesting sort of person. Although probably he was not a young man, his age was somewhat difficult to determine. His black hair and eyes and his well-proportioned figure gave him a title to be called handsome, and he had the easy and slightly authoritative manner of one of whose position is well established in society. She heard him addressed several times as "Sir Harry," and observed that his remarks were listened to with a deference for which their intrinsic worth seemed scarcely sufficient to account. Apparently he had been staying

with various well-known people, who had not had the good fortune to succeed in amusing him; for he had little to say in praise of any of them, and complained that everybody nowadays was going in for political meetings, which he stigmatized as the dullest method of killing time that had ever been invented.

Nothing is so likely to secure respect as a heartfelt sense of superiority to those about you, and this supercilious gentleman undoubtedly won his way to a higher place in Sylvia Wentworth's esteem than he could have done had he not been so obviously indifferent to the fact that he had a pretty girl at his elbow. After some considerable time, however, he deigned to become aware of her presence, and, undeterred by the circumstance that he had not been formally presented to her, interrupted the conversation which poor Johnny Hill was laboring hard to keep alive.

"How do you contrive to amuse yourself here?" he inquired. "Do you hunt, or do you go out and watch the men shooting, or are you yourself a crack shot? I met a young lady the other day who could hit anything, including a beater. I saw her bag the beater, but she had presence of mind enough to swear that she was innocent, and I didn't tell upon her."

Sylvia replied that she, at any rate, could swear that she was innocent of any man's blood, never having fired off a gun in her life. She added that she thought it was easy enough for women to find amusements without attempting to take part in those which are usually supposed to be reserved for the other sex.

"Oh, I've no doubt you find it so," he returned, laughing; "and if you don't bring us down in one way you probably do in another. The only compensation that I have ever been able to discover for my advanced age is that I can now snap my fingers at you all."

"You call your age advanced because you want to be contradicted," Sylvia made so bold as to remark.

"Thanks for the compliment, but I scorn to deceive you. Besides, I am quite sure that if I tried to do so, you would look me up in the red book and put me to confusion. I shall be five-and-forty next birthday.

Why I am neither gray nor bald I can't tell you, for I am sure I have had as much trouble as most people. I suppose it must be the immaculate purity of my conscience that has preserved me so well."

This was said in a voice loud enough to reach the ears of half a dozen persons, who did not laugh, but looked down at their plates with an air of grave abstraction. Thus Sylvia gathered that her interlocutor's conscience was not wholly void of offence, and thus, it must be owned, her interest in him was increased. In any case, he was better worth talking to than Johnny Hill, and the pains that she took to please him did not seem to be thrown away, inasmuch as he honored her with his undivided attention until the time for her to retire. He asked her a great many questions about herself and her belongings and pursuits, taking up a paternal sort of tone and deriving evident entertainment from some of her answers; but he was not very communicative in return, and it was only after she had left the dining-room that she had the privilege of hearing a concise description of him from one of the dowagers.

"Oh, haven't you ever heard of Sir Harry Brewster!" the old lady said, in response to her queries. "He is a rather prominent personage upon the turf and—and elsewhere. Well, the less you see or hear of him the better, my dear, for he is not nice—not nice in any way."

Naturally, that authoritative verdict did not prevent Sylvia Wentworth from thinking him nice, nor did it lessen her curiosity with regard to him. Later in the evening somebody proposed dancing in the saloon, which was a long room with a polished floor, easily cleared of superfluous furniture, and then it was that she found an opportunity of accosting her late neighbor, who had stationed himself in the doorway in the attitude of a spectator.

"Aren't you going to dance?" she asked.

"Oh, no," he answered, shaking his head; "I leave that sort of thing to the young people."

"I am one of the young people," Miss Sylvia remarked, demurely, "and I don't see much prospect of my getting a single respectable partner."

"In that case," he returned, laughing, "I will make so bold as to ask you for a dance. Heaven forbid that you should be deprived of respectability while I am here to represent it!"

Well, he was something more than respectable as a waltzer, whatever he might be in other ways; if he was wicked, he was not the less attractive on that account. A man whom old ladies speak of as "not nice" is usually understood by young ladies to be one who has made many conquests, and it is a part of feminine nature to adore conquerors of all kinds. Sir Harry Brewster did not give himself the airs of a conqueror, nor did he cease to treat Sylvia Wentworth as a child; but he confessed that he was flattered by her praise of his dancing, which emboldened him to monopolize her for the remainder of the evening. She enjoyed his company and conversation all the more because she caught Lady Morecambe glancing anxiously at her several times, and even because she saw Johnny Hill doing his best to look ferocious. To arouse the jealousy of Johnny Hill was a small triumph; but she did not despise small triumphs. As for her partner, she felt that it would be a great triumph to convert his somewhat condescending patronage of her into a warmer sentiment, and she unscrupulously made use of all the gifts which she had received from nature for the attainment of that end. However, she could not flatter herself that she had advanced far on the road towards success when she took leave of him.

"Good-night, Miss Wentworth," said he, laughingly, "and thank you for having taken pity upon an old fogey. I suppose you know that I have been making myself ridiculous in the eyes of the youngsters all this time; but never mind! I forgive you, and I dare say you won't do it again."

CHAPTER V.

LADY MORECAMBE was one of those well-intentioned, commonplace persons to whom a wide experience of life is not of the slightest service, and who never arrive at any clear comprehension of their fellow-mortals, because their memories are so short and because they never take the trouble to arrive at a clear comprehension of themselves. In her youth she had done many foolish things; at middle-age she was not wise, but she had learnt just as much as nobody can help learning, and she thought it incumbent upon her to speak a few cautionary words to the girl who had been placed for a time under her care. After breakfast, therefore, on the day following that of which some account has been given in the last chapter, she led Sylvia Wentworth away into the conservatory with her, and, while snipping off azaleas and dropping them into the basket which she carried, remarked casually:

"I was sorry to see that they had put you next to Sir Harry Brewster at dinner last night and that you danced with him in the evening. I purposely avoided introducing him to you."

"I thought him very pleasant," answered Sylvia. "What has he done that he can't be introduced to strangers?"

"He has done all sorts of things which I am not going to tell you about. He is very bad indeed—shockingly bad. Indeed, I should never think of asking him here if Morecambe didn't insist upon it. You see, he happens to be one of the best shots in England, and when a man enjoys that distinction he can't very well be left out, whatever his moral character may be. Only I can't be responsible for introducing him to children like you, and

I think it was very bad form of him to speak to you without being introduced."

"I was very glad that he did," Sylvia declared. "He didn't contaminate me; he talked to me like a father, and I was grateful to him for delivering me from Johnny Hill. Please, Lady Morecambe, don't send me in to dinner with Johnny Hill again."

"I will try to find somebody else for you this evening," her good-natured hostess answered; "but I can promise you that it will not be Sir Harry Brewster. You are much too young to be told his history—you must take my word for it that he is a dangerous acquaintance. All the more so because he can be extremely fascinating when he likes."

It would scarcely have been possible to be more injudicious. Sylvia made no rejoinder, but, of course, the warning only strengthened her determination to cultivate the acquaintance of the mysterious personage, who neither looked nor talked like a reprobate. To doubt the sincerity of their own sex is a lesson which women learn at a very early age, and Sylvia was both unkind enough and precocious enough to suspect that Lady Morecambe's charms had failed to find favor in the sight of Sir Harry Brewster.

However, no immediate opportunity of bringing her personal charms to bear upon him was granted to her; for all the men went out shooting in the morning, and, rather to her disappointment, no suggestion was made that the ladies should join them at the luncheon hour. It was not until late in the afternoon, when Lady Morecambe had gone off for a drive with two venerable dowagers, that she was enabled to join a party of the younger matrons who proposed to walk towards the coverts and hear the result of the day's sport. This, it appeared, had been quite magnificent. She and her companions had not tramped very far across the wet grass when they encountered the returning sportsmen, headed by Lord Morecambe, whose rosy countenance was radiant with satisfaction.

"I can't think how the deuce he does it," Sylvia heard him saying, above the babble of talk which immediately

broke forth; "he simply doesn't know how to miss! And he has been just the same for the last fifteen or twenty years, mind you. In all my born days I never saw such a fellow!"

"He alludes to me," remarked somebody, who, as Sylvia very well knew, was standing close behind her. "Flattering, isn't it? One could have done without that allusion to the last twenty years, though. Ancient as I am, and well as I shoot, I will say for myself that I wasn't quite up to my present form before I attained my majority."

"Why do you always try to make yourself out so antiquated?" asked the girl, turning round and surveying Sir Harry's spare, erect figure. "A man is never old until he chooses to call himself so, and as for you, you couldn't be made to look anything but young."

Sir Harry laughed and bowed. "Thank you," he answered. "It is true that I look a year or two younger than I am, and that, I suppose, is what you mean; but there is no getting over the painful fact that I am old enough to be your father."

There are certain facts which have only such significance as we feel disposed to ascribe to them. Sylvia thought of her father, with his scanty hair, his gray beard, and his sedentary habits, and laughed aloud. "You are a wonderful shot and a splendid dancer," said she; "perhaps you would neither be the one nor the other if you were still a boy."

"If I could be a boy again, I would cheerfully consent to be unable to hit a haystack and to dance like—who shall we say?—like your young friend who took you into dinner last night.

"But as such bargains can't be made, the only sensible plan is to make the most of the privileges which belong to one's time of life. While you are pounding round and round the room at the county ball to-night I shall be smoking a peaceful cigar before the fire, and while you are poisoning yourselves with bad champagne I shall be sleeping soundly, free from all the troubles which I shall remember as soon as I wake."

"One forgets one's troubles when one is waltzing with

a good partner," said Sylvia; "I know that because I can speak from experience. Won't you come to the ball and try my prescription? Even if it doesn't succeed in your case, you will have the comfort of thinking that you have done what you could to make it successful in mine."

"Am I to understand that you ask this as a personal favor?" inquired Sir Harry, with a side glance which was half tender, half mocking.

Sylvia nodded.

"Well, then, I must make an effort. Oh, yes; I will certainly make an effort. Only if I fail at the last moment to come up to the scratch, you will understand that exhausted nature or my natural diffidence or something of that sort has been too much for me."

Their colloquy was interrupted at this point, and they were allowed no subsequent chance of resuming it. At dinner time Lady Morecambe, faithful to her undertaking, ordered a young man who was not Johnny Hill to escort Sylvia, and placed the whole length of the table between her and Sir Harry Brewster. Immediately afterwards it was found necessary for the ladies to go upstairs and put on their ball dresses, and before Miss Sylvia Wentworth had studied the general effect of her costume in the mirror half as long as she could have desired, she received an impatient message to the effect that everybody was waiting for her.

Everybody included Johnny Hill, and did not include Sir Harry Brewster. She made that unwelcome discovery after she had seated herself in the omnibus which was to convey her and her fellow-revellers to the heignboring county town, Lady Morecambe, accompanied by two of the more distinguished guests, having already departed. It appeared, however, that a relay of men was expected to follow later on, so that there was still room for hope.

Nevertheless, Miss Sylvia entered the ball-room in an irritable mood. Sir Harry Brewster was nothing at all to her; still she had made up her mind to dance with him, and she had gone the length of begging him to be present at this ball against his will, and she was neither accustomed to being snubbed nor fond of the sensation.

And so it was that, with some vague idea of punishing the absentee, she filled up her card in less than ten minutes. That, of course, is what a pretty, charmingly dressed and well-vouched-for girl can accomplish without any difficulty if she be not over particular, and Sylvia on this occasion was not the least inclined to be particular. Lady Morecambe, meaning to be kind, led up to her a host of strangers, whose names she booked with the impartiality of total indifference; also she made Johnny Hill happy by granting him four dances all for himself. Having thus cut off her nose to spite her face, she began dancing, and kept an anxious eye fixed upon the doorway.

Now, as she was quite convinced that Sir Harry Brewster did not mean to keep his promise, it should have been no surprise to her to find him conspicuous by his absence from the knot of laggards who ultimately put in an appearance; but disappointments are seldom appreciated, and when a young lady who has not learnt the lesson of self-control is disappointed, somebody usually has to bear the brunt of her ill humour. The luckless Johnny Hill took his punishment meekly. He did not resent being told, after a turn or two, that his step was simply impossible, and that there was nothing for it but to sit out the remainder of the dance; he submitted without a murmur to his partner's contemptuous disregard of the efforts that he made to entertain her, and he judged it best to agree with her when she declared that everything connected with this ball was detestable—the floor, the decorations, the music, the people, everything.

"I wish to goodness I had had the sense to stay at home!" she exclaimed.

"I can't quite wish that," said this well-meaning young man. "Unless," he added, as a happy after-thought, "I had stayed at home with you."

"If I had stayed at home you wouldn't have been with me," returned Sylvia, viciously. "If I had stayed at home I should have read a book, and I should have been spared the labor of providing ideas for people who have none of their own."

This was rather unjust, considering that she had not

as yet originated a single topic of conversation; but the provoking thing about Johnny was that injustice only bewildered him; it did not make him angry.

"I'm afraid," he said, diffidently, after a pause, "that something has put you out."

Sylvia shot a wrathful, questioning glance at him; but perceiving that his countenance expressed only puzzled concern, she answered quickly:

"Nothing whatever has put me out, except the things that I have been telling you about, which ought to be sufficient, one would think. I wish they were sufficient to put me out in a literal sense; but I suppose it wouldn't be easy to get oneself ejected from a refined gathering like this. Nothing short of intoxication would do it, eh?"

This being apparently a joke, Johnny felt bound to laugh, although he felt some doubt as to the good taste of the remark. But indeed it was no longer of any consequence whether he laughed or wept; for his partner had suddenly become totally oblivious of him. Whence Sir Harry Brewster had sprung at that advanced hour of the evening she was at a loss to imagine; but there he was, crossing the room towards her with a smile upon his face, and it was in the most matter-of-course tone in the world he said:

"Well, Miss Wentworth, I have turned up to claim my dance, you see."

Sylvia could not for the life of her help looking pleased; but she contrived to reply with befitting coldness and dignity, "Oh, you are much too late; my card was filled up ages ago."

And then, as he merely fell back, shrugging his shoulders slightly and making a gesture of resignation, she was fain to add, "You didn't expect me to keep anything open upon the off chance of your appearing in the small hours of the morning, did you?"

"At the risk of appearing outrageously presumptuous," he replied, "I will confess that I did. You see, I shouldn't have been here at all if you hadn't ordered me to come. Of course I had no business to fall asleep after dinner; but the moment that I woke I did all that mortal man

could do to atone for my sin. What Morecambe will say when he hears that I drove one of his hunters over here in a dogcart I can't think; but I am assured that I risked my life by attempting such a thing; so I hope you will admit that I have earned a dance even if I am not to be allowed one."

"Under the circumstances," said Sylvia, who felt that this explanation gave the offender a claim to be leniently dealt with, "I might throw somebody over." And without the slightest compunction she turned to Johnny Hill and told him that, after all, he couldn't have number sixteen. "I promised it to Sir Harry Brewster, only I thought he had forgotten."

Johnny, who was neither a well-bred nor a reasonable being, had the audacity to protest. He said that was really rather rough upon him. He didn't see why he should give way to a man who hadn't taken the trouble to be in the room at the proper time, and he thought Sir Harry Brewster might very well be content with an extra. There were sure to be some extras. But Sylvia did not so much as pay him the compliment of listening to his remonstrance. Sir Harry offered her his arm and led her away, while Johnny was left to reflect upon the extraordinary deficiency of all sense of honorable obligation which seems to be characteristic of the female sex.

If it would have comforted him in any measure to know that he was not the only person to whom Miss Sylvia proved faithless during the remainder of the evening, that melancholy consolation might have been his. She was, perhaps, too inexperienced to be aware that the throwing over of a partner means the acquisition of an implacable enemy, or too indifferent to trouble her head whether she made friends or enemies in a country which she did not inhabit. Either way, she danced with nobody but Sir Harry Brewster until the programme was exhausted, and, when her legitimate companions sought her out, dismissed them with a cynical coolness which at once flattered that gentleman's vanity and tickled his sense of humor.

"Do you make a habit of behaving in this way?" he asked. "It isn't for me to complain; but I doubt whether you would be wise to pay such a compliment to a man twenty, or even ten years younger."

"Oh, you needn't feel yourself compromised," she answered, laughing; "you know how to dance and these people don't—that's all."

"That's all, is it? Well, I am glad I dance better than they do; but I should have been still more glad if you had preferred my company to theirs on other grounds. Are you still in the stage of regarding men merely as dancing-machines?"

"I have never been in that stage," Sylvia replied, "and I shouldn't think that anybody ever was. I only wanted to explain why I was thankful of any excuse for being bruised all over. Still, I daresay it won't make you very conceited if I own that I would rather talk to you than to a set of yokels. You at least have lived in the world."

He certainly had; and his acquaintance with the world had imbued him with a poor opinion of its inhabitants. This, or a portion of it, he confided to the girl whose innocent blue eyes met his from time to time, and upon whom his moralizings were entirely thrown away. That story about the Dead Sea apples is a very stale one, and never since the world began has anybody's experience been of the slightest service to his neighbors. Yet, although Sylvia wanted to see the world, and meant to see it, with her own eyes, she did not object to hearing its vanity exposed by one who knew it so well, and she did her best to draw rather more specific and personal statements from him. In that attempt she met with no great success; but she arrived at the conclusion that he was not nearly as black as he was painted, and she was much pleased when he expressed a wish that they might meet again in London before long.

"I shall be going up for a week or two when I leave this," he said. "Do you think Mr. Wentworth would allow me to call?"

"I am sure he would be very glad," answered Sylvia, "and so should I. You can't think what a dull life I lead at home. Muriel hates society. She goes to a certain number of dinners, to which I am not invited, and her one idea of amusing me seems to be to take me to a Saturday popular concert every week. That is all

very well, but one doesn't meet people at Saturday populars, you know, except by some extraordinary chance."

"It won't be extraordinary if you meet me at one of them," returned Sir Harry, laughing, "because I shall make a point of attending them in future. I am rather fond of music, as it happens. Are you?"

Sylvia shook her head. "No; I think I rather hate it. I like doing things; I don't like sitting still and listening."

"I understand and I apologize. Let us begin to dance again forthwith."

But there was to be no more dancing for Sylvia that night, for before she could make any answer she was tapped on the shoulder by Lady Morecambe's fan, and Lady Morecambe's voice, which had an unwonted ring of asperity in it, said: "I am sorry to drag you away; but the carriage has been waiting nearly an hour, and perhaps it would look more dignified to retire now than to wait until we are God-save-the-Queened out of the place."

CHAPTER VI.

Sylvia had only been invited to stay at Morecambe Priory until the day after the ball, but she thought it extremely probable that she would be asked to prolong her visit, and she had every intention of yielding to persuasion. She could not, therefore, manage to conceal her disappointment when, on the following morning, Lady Morecambe intimated to her in a cheerful, matter-of-course tone that a carriage would be ready to take her to the station after luncheon.

"I am very sorry my outing is at an end!" she sighed.

"So are we all, my dear, I'm sure; but you must come back to us. I will write and let you know when there are more entertainments in prospect and when we can get together a few people who will be likely to amuse you."

Sylvia declared that the present house-party was quite as amusing a one as she could wish for; but Lady Morecambe was pleased to ignore that broad hint.

Without being a very strict chaperone, Lady Morecambe had no fancy for earning well-merited reproaches, and when a young girl who had been placed under her charge took to sitting out several consecutive dances with a man of Sir Harry Brewster's character, the time seemed to have arrived for packing that young girl off home as speedily as might be. Meanwhile, Sir Harry, who had breakfasted early, had gone out shooting, and there was no fear of his reappearance before dusk. His name was not mentioned to Sylvia; but in the course of the morning she overheard Lady Morecambe speaking about him in an annoyed tone to one of the old ladies.

"I really cannot see why a man should be allowed to take such liberties merely because he is rather more cer-

tain of hitting pheasants than other men. A horse that had never been in harness before! If it had been anybody else Morecambe would have been furious: as it is, the unfortunate stud-groom has been blown up sky-high."

The old lady had made some inaudible remarks; to which Lady Morecambe replied, "Oh, of course I should take very good care to put a stop to anything of that kind."

It was easy to divine what was the kind of thing to which Lady Morecambe was so determined to put a stop, and for the moment Sylvia's sentiments with regard to her hostess were not those of gratitude or affection. How unkind and suspicious people were! What possible harm could she get from talking to a man who, as he himself had been careful to point out, was old enough to be her father? Anyhow, she would, if possible, say good-bye to him; and greatly vexed was she when it dawned upon her that this would not be possible. There were several men at luncheon; but the shooting-party was represented only by Johnny Hill, who explained that he had been "utterly off it, somehow or other," and had thought it best to come home.

The ill-advised Johnny followed her out of the dining-room into the library, whither she betook herself while waiting for the carriage to come round, and said reproachfully: "This is too bad of you; why do you run away just when I have come down?"

"I give you my sacred word of honor," answered Sylvia, with emphasis, "that your presence or absence are not in the most remote way concerned with my movements."

"Oh, I know that," the young man returned quite humbly; "but it's a sell all the same. The ball last night was a sell too. If I was to be thrown over, I must say I would have been thrown over in favor of any man in the room rather than that fellow Brewster."

"I really don't see what difference it could make to you; but if you have anything unpleasant to say about Sir Harry Brewster, don't say it to me, please; because I particularly like him."

"Oh, all right. You wouldn't like him so much if you knew a little more about him, though."

"I daresay I know as much about him as you do: anyhow it doesn't interest me to listen to gossip. I quite understand your being jealous of him, because he shoots and dances so much better than you do; but you ought to be prepared for meeting people of that description. There must be a good many of them in the world."

Having thus crushed her submissive admirer, Sylvia felt a little better and was able to take her leave without making it too apparent that she was conscious of having been sent away more or less in disgrace. But on the homeward journey her spirits gradually sank lower and lower; so that she reached Upper Brook Street in a frame of mind which was far from amiability. To people of an irritable temperament there is apt to be something provoking in returning, after a period of absence, to find everybody and everything exactly in their accustomed places—which must account for the somewhat unkindly greeting extended by Sylvia to her aunt.

"Oh, Muriel," she exclaimed, with a little vexed laugh, "why are you always having tea at half-past five?—and why are you always sitting in the same chair and looking as if you hadn't moved out of it for the last year or two? Do you *never* feel that you would like to make a change?"

Sylvia Wentworth had acquired a prescriptive right to behave like a spoilt child in the family circle. Her health was not good; some wiseacre of a doctor had said that she ought to be indulged, and the wiseacre's advice had been acted upon, with results which were scarcely satisfactory in the main.

Muriel only laughed and answered:—

"I should like very much to make a change; but I doubt whether sitting in another chair or having tea a little earlier or later would answer the purpose. Well, have you had a good time at Morecambe?"

Sylvia unwound her boa, threw open her jacket and seated herself upon the hearthrug, holding up her hands to the blaze. "Pretty well," she replied. "The ball was rather a failure; but there were some tolerably nice people staying in the house."

"Johnny Hill, amongst others, I hear."

"Oh, yes, Johnny was there. "*Why* he was there I can't imagine—poor wretch!"

"Harriet Morecambe means to be good-natured," observed Muriel, reflectively; "I suppose somebody must have told her something. But of course it is all perfect nonsense; and I wish you would leave the unfortunate boy alone, Sylvia. After all, he is hardly worth powder and shot, is he?"

"Good gracious me! you don't suppose I have expended powder and shot upon him, do you?" asked Sylvia, disdainfully. "If ever I have insulted anybody in my life, I have insulted Johnny Hill; it isn't my fault if he doesn't mind, and it certainly wasn't my fault that he was asked to Morecambe. It wasn't my fault that I came away either; but Lady Morecambe wouldn't ask me to stay on. Oh, dear! what a deadly dull business life is! What have you been doing while I have been away? But I needn't ask. A few dinners, a few concerts and a little district visiting—the same old bill of fare day after day and week after week!"

Muriel did not care to mention such variety as had been introduced into it by the sermon and the visit of Mr. Compton, nor did Sylvia, when questioned as to the guests whom she had met at Morecambe Priory, care to mention the name of Sir Henry Brewster. Hence it will be inferred that no great sympathy existed between these two young ladies; although each of them was probably as sincerely attached to the other as to anybody else in the world. They seldom agreed; yet, by reason of the forbearance of the elder, they very seldom quarrelled, the only respect in which they could be said to be of one mind was that they were both thoroughly dissatisfied.

Therein they differed from Mr. Wentworth, whose epicurean philosophy led him to make the best of life as he found it, and who in fact found it quite tolerable. After a time he strolled into the drawing-room, kissed his daughter, said he hoped she had been enjoying herself, and, without waiting to hear her answer, asked Muriel who was coming to dinner next Thursday.

Muriel consulted a note-book and read out half a dozen names.

"You might chuck in the Hills, mother and son," said Mr. Wentworth. "Just now at the club I came across that Colonel Medhurst whom we met the other night, and I asked him. He isn't a bad sort of fellow."

Muriel had no objection to Colonel Medhurst, but demurred to the Hills. "Would they amalgamate very well with the others?" she asked, doubtfully.

"Oh, no, I shouldn't think they would; that's one reason why I want them to come. Nothing is more amusing than stirring up ingredients which won't mix and watching the result. Besides, Mrs. Hill and I amalgamate splendidly; I may say without undue vanity that if she is placed next to me she will be happy. Perhaps Sylvia will undertake the head of the Hill family."

"That I most certainly will not," Sylvia declared, resolutely. "Send me in to dinner with any old bore you like; but at least spare me Johnny Hill. Why, I have only just escaped from him!"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Wentworth, with a subdued chuckle; "I was quite under the impression that he was a friend of yours; since he isn't, far be it from me to inflict him upon you. No doubt your aunt can dispose otherwise of him. All I stipulate for is that the lovely and accomplished Mrs. Hill shall sit either on my right hand or my left."

It was easier to accede to his request than to Sylvia's; but, by some slight disregard of the strict rules of precedence, Muriel contrived to gratify them both, and if all the twelve persons who ranged themselves round Mr. Wentworth's dining-table on the following Thursday were not entirely contented with their neighbors, that, after all, is a misfortune of which hostesses have to make the best. Mr. Wentworth was fond of giving small dinners and took pleasure in incongruity, so that his sister had become inured to failures which he never would admit to be such. On this particular occasion she enjoyed herself individually rather more than usual; for Colonel Medhurst sat beside her and talked about Mr. Compton the whole time.

"Compton," said he, after eulogizing his friend in no measured terms, "is one of the finest fellows living. All the same, if he were dead and if it were proposed to canonize him, I think I should know what to say as *advocatus diaboli*."

"And what would that be?" Muriel inquired.

"It will be my duty to tell you when I hear of your having been admitted as a novice into the Society of St. Francis. For the present I will only say that he doesn't make enough allowance for human frailty. There are things which some of us *can't* do, and when a man keeps on asserting that we ought to do them he rouses the worst side of our nature into activity. But I daresay you will find that out for yourself later on."

Now, this was rather a clever sort of criticism for a simple-minded person like Colonel Medhurst to have made, and Muriel would gladly have pursued the subject further; but unluckily it was not uttered until the fag end of the dinner, so that she took a sense of unsatisfied curiosity upstairs with her. And then her thoughts were diverted from Colonel Medhurst and Mr. Compton by the strange behavior of Sylvia, who declined in a most determined manner an invitation from Mrs. Hill which, judging by all precedent, she would have accepted with alacrity. Mrs. Hill was going to give what she called "an impromptu afternoon dance" on the following Saturday, and although there are, no doubt, many people who abhor afternoon dances, Sylvia Wentworth had never given her friends reason to suppose that she was one of them. Moreover, the excuse which she alleged was obviously insincere. In the first place, she had never promised to go to St. James's Hall with her aunt; and in the second place, if she had, she would have broken her promise without an instant's hesitation had she wished to do so.

However, Muriel was too considerate to raise her voice in protest. She remained neutral while her niece obstinately resisted the entreaties of Mrs. Hill and the grumblings of Johnny; and it was only after the party had broken up that she asked: "Why in the world are you so anxious to go to the next Saturday Popular, Sylvia?"

"Who told you that I was? returned the girl. "I was anxious not to go to Mrs. Hill's that was all. You were preaching to me the other day that I ought to leave Johnny Hill alone, and the seed has fallen upon good ground. I am resolved to let him alone, if he will only allow me."

Well it was permissible to doubt the absolute honesty of that profession; but at any rate Muriel could not suspect that a classical concert possessed any special attraction for her niece. It would have been as reasonable to surmise that Beethoven's Symphony No. 4 in B flat was capable of attracting a sporting baronet. Yet—for improbable events are always occurring—St. James's Hall was graced on Saturday afternoon by the presence of the sporting baronet and the unmusical young lady; and a very provoking circumstance it was for one, if not for both of them, that they were precluded from all possibility of exchanging anything more than a distant salute. What is the use of recognizing a friend from afar if you are placed in the very middle of a row of stalls, with solid and immovable persons all round you? Sylvia frowned and bit her lips and beat the devil's tattoo with her little foot; but these manifestations of impotent wrath were wasted upon her neighbors, who naturally did not understand that she expected them to get up and walk about between the pieces.

Nor was she any more fortunate when the concert was over and the audience had begun to disperse. That opportunity, it might have been supposed, would be seized by any man in search of opportunities; it would have been so easy for Sir Harry Brewster to shoulder his way through the throng and offer to find Miss Wentworth's carriage for her.

But it so chanced that Sir Harry's passage was barred by two corpulent old women, and then, as ill luck would have it, the footman, who was seldom discoverable when wanted, was for once on the alert; so that poor Sylvia was hurried off into the carriage before she had time to think of dropping something and being obliged to return for it.

"Oh, *hang* it all!" she scandalized Muriel by exclaiming, as she threw herself back in her corner.

Young ladies ought never to indulge in such expressions; but everyone will admit that a coachman is entitled, under certain circumstances, to say something even stronger, and Miss Wentworth's coachman made use of some powerful and striking language when the near horse caught his bit on the pole. The frightened beast began to lash out; the footman promptly leaped down from the box, rather with a view to insuring his personal safety than to rendering any assistance; a crowd collected, and a very pretty scrimmage ensued, in the midst of which Muriel and Sylvia were dragged out on to the pavement by some officious bystanders.

Thus a chance was at length given to Sir Harry Brewster, who, if he was too polite to shoulder aside old ladies, had no such scruple about scattering a street crowd. In a very short space of time he had reached the horses' heads and put matters straight; after which it became his pleasing duty to reassure the two distressed damsels.

"It is all right," he said, advancing towards them, with his hat in his hand; "only I think you will have to let me call a cab for you, because you have broken a trace and your splinter-bar has suffered."

And when Sylvia had introduced him to her aunt and he had been thanked for his timely aid, he improved the occasion by saying: "If you will excuse my telling you so, you shouldn't use those old-fashioned bits and you shouldn't drive about the streets of London without bearing-reins. You may depend upon it that you risk an accident every time you go out."

"I don't know about the bits," answered Sylvia, "but it was Muriel who insisted upon doing away with bearing-reins. She took it into her head that they were cruel."

Sir Harry explained that that was a mistake into which kind-hearted persons were very apt to fall; bearing-reins were only cruel if you chose to make them so. He delivered a little lecture upon the subject while helping the ladies into their hansom, and there was a suggestion of expectancy about his demeanor when he wished them good-bye which moved Muriel to say hesitatingly that she hoped he would call in Upper Brook Street some day.

"I wonder whether it was the right thing to do!" she murmured anxiously, after they had left him.

"Of course it was," answered Sylvia; "and I should have done it if you hadn't. I met him at Morecambe, you know. Isn't he nice."

"He looks like a gentleman," observed Muriel, guardedly.

"A gentleman? I should think so! Why he is—well, I can't tell you exactly what he is, but everybody knows him."

Under the circumstances, it was perhaps just as well for Miss Sylvia that her aunt was not everybody.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. WENTWORTH pursed up his lips and raised his eyebrows when Muriel told him the name of the gentleman who had so obligingly befriended them.

"Sir Harry Brewster?" said he, "well, you know, or rather perhaps you don't know, and, after all, it's no business of ours. Only he hasn't had precisely an edifying career."

"I am very sorry I asked him to call," Muriel said; "but I didn't see how I could very well help it."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. His peculiarities are not likely to be infectious, and if he is good enough for Lady Morecambe, I suppose he is good enough for us. Still there is a certain quaintness in his having been taken up by you, of all people."

"I never thought of taking him up," answered Muriel, "I knew nothing whatever about him. But I do wish Lady Morecambe hadn't introduced him to Sylvia! All the more so because she has evidently conceived a great admiration for him."

"She is welcome to admire him as much as she likes," returned Mr. Wentworth, placidly. "The man must be just about my own age."

"He doesn't look it," observed Muriel, doubtfully.

"Thank you, my dear; but if you will consult the recognized authorities, you will find that I am not very far wrong. He is by way of being completely ruined; but that doesn't seem to interfere with his keeping a racing stable."

"I must try to be out when he calls," said Muriel in a meditative tone.

"I should think it is quite upon the cards that he will

not force you to be so uncivil. At his time of life a man isn't usually so keen about making acquaintances out of his own set."

This was, no doubt, a perfectly just observation, and under ordinary circumstances it might have been as applicable to Sir Harry Brewster as to most of his contemporaries; but there were reasons which disposed Sir Harry to make an exception in favor of the Wentworth family. Sylvia had succeeded in fascinating him, an easy feat to accomplish, many people might have said, but in reality not one within the capacities of every pretty little girl. He had not exactly fallen in love with her; but he thought her charming, he was gratified, although he laughed at himself for being so, by the unconcealed preference with which she honored him, and he felt that he would be doing himself a great unkindness if he were to lose sight of her. Moreover, there was one other consideration which had presented itself to him in the light of a remote possibility. Mr. Wentworth had exaggerated in describing him as a ruined man; but he had squandered fully three-fourths of a large fortune, and more than once of late he had had disagreeable experience of the inconvenience of lack of ready money. Well, Miss Wentworth, as he had understood, was an only child, and her father was said to be comfortably off—something might come of it. But indeed this notion was put forward chiefly by way of persuading his conscience (for he still possessed a conscience, somewhat the worse for wear and tear), that he was provided with what is generally held to be a sufficient excuse for following up a casual acquaintance with a young girl; he did not seriously contemplate offering his hand to Miss Sylvia, nor could he suppose that her relations would hear her of such an alliance. He was too old; he was too poor; above all, his record was too notoriously evil. But as, after full consideration, he decided to call in Upper Brook Street, it will be perceived that the restraining influence of Sir Harry's conscience was not very powerful.

It so happened that on the afternoon which he selected for his visit a little group of ladies was assembled round Muriel's tea-table; so that she was unable to keep watch

and ward over him, as she would fain have done. Diffidence not being amongst his failings, he was in no way chilled by the somewhat formal fashion in which she greeted him, but remained standing beside her for several minutes and talking with the assured ease and friendliness of one who does not doubt his welcome. He then took up the cup of tea which she had poured out for him and calmly walked away with it to the sofa where Sylvia was seated.

"I have a crow to pluck with you," he began, as he placed himself beside her. "Why did you bolt away from Morecambe in that precipitate manner, without so much as allowing people a chance to bid you good-bye."

"I went away for the very good reason that my time was up," answered Sylvia. "One can't stay on in a house unless one is asked, can one?"

"Oh, I don't know. I always do, if I feel inclined. I don't very often feel inclined, though; and certainly I didn't feel inclined to linger at Morecambe after your departure."

"Thank you very much," returned Sylvia with a little bow. "All the same, I don't believe you would have sacrificed a morning's shooting even if you had known that I was leaving."

"Oh, yes, I should; I should have sacrificed it quite cheerfully, at the risk of enraging Lady Morecambe, who thinks that every effort ought to be made to keep me out in the open air when I am staying with her. Lady Morecambe regards me as a reprobate, from whom it is necessary that the young and innocent should be warned off. I shouldn't wonder if she had told you so."

"A great many people are called reprobates," remarked Sylvia. "I don't know what it is that they are supposed to do or have done; but I do know that they are much pleasanter to talk to than the saints or the dull respectabilities. Are you really so very much worse than your neighbors?"

"I am afraid so; but it is difficult to say, because one can't tell for certain how bad one's neighbors may be. Still I don't quite see why my past misdeeds should make me unfit to be spoken to. So far as our intercourse has

gone, you have found me behave pretty well, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes," answered Sylvia, laughing, "I have no complaint to make."

She would have liked to hear something rather more precise as to Sir Harry's alleged wickedness: but the subject seemed to be one which demanded delicate handling, and he did not respond to her tentative allusions. Doubtless he found it pleasanter and safer to talk about her than about himself, and as she had nothing to conceal, he was soon made acquainted with all her aspirations and grievances.

"It is so hateful to know that at the very best one can only look forward to a few years of real life!" she exclaimed; "and to think that one is throwing away day after day of the precious time! If a woman is clever, if she can *do* something such as writing or singing or painting—or even if she is a sort of pious enthusiast, like Muriel, it is different; but what is to become of a helpless ignoramus after her youth is over?"

"I don't think I pity you so very much," said Sir Harry, smiling; "you have a good many years of youth before you yet. Besides, if you will allow a man of my age the privilege of impertinence, I will make so bold as to remind you that you possess one gift for which the clever women and the pious women would be glad to exchange all their talent and piety."

Sylvia did not think him impertinent; but she returned, somewhat petulantly, "It makes me feel as if you thought me a silly child; and if I am to feel like that, I would rather not go on talking to you."

In the presence of that threat, Sir Harry promised amendment; and indeed she noticed that his tone had already become more friendly and less paternal than it had been at Morecambe Priory. He did not talk like a lover, perhaps hardly even like a potential lover; but he insinuated compliments, every now and then, which sounded pleasantly in her ears, and he propounded various schemes for her diversion. Did she think her father and her aunt would consent to make up a little party to the theatre some evening and allow him to

entertain them at supper afterwards? Was she fond of coaching? Because, if so, they might choose a fine day and drive down to Richmond or elsewhere.

"I have no coach of my own nowadays," he added, with a laugh; "times are too bad. But a friend of mine who has gone off to lose his money at Monte Carlo, has left me in charge of his horses, and it is my duty to give them exercise."

All this was very delightful to Sylvia, who began to see blissful visions.

Of course the ambition to shine in the fashionable world is not a very noble one; but ambitions are many and nobility of purpose is rare. Possibly there may be personages holding exalted positions whose moral level is not very much higher than was that of Sylvia Wentworth.

The ladies who had been chattering over the tea-table went away refreshed; others, to Muriel's annoyance, came in and took their places; but still Sir Harry lingered on. As he had truly said of himself, he always stayed when he felt inclined to stay, and he might have added that he always did what he was inclined to do: he had known no other rule through life. He was at length about to rise and take his leave when Mrs. Hill was shown into the room, followed by the docile Johnny.

"Oh, *what* a nuisance!" groaned Sylvia; "here are those dreadful people again!"

Sir Harry had an eyeglass, which he screwed into his eye, surveying the newcomers. "Dear me!" said he; "isn't that our young friend whom you treated so abominably at the ball? And that very ornate old lady is his mamma, I presume. Does she make a practice of leading the poor fellow about in this way?"

"She does when she calls here," answered Sylvia, ruefully; "and the worst of it is that she is forever calling here. Whether Johnny likes it or not, I don't know; but he doesn't look as if he did."

"I should imagine," said Sir Harry, with an amused smile, "that he was not an unwilling victim. What gives him that truculent expression just now is that he thinks I mean to monopolize you all the time he is here.

He little knows how unselfish I am and how eager to promote everybody's happiness."

Mrs. Hill came trotting across the room to embrace her young friend. (If there was one thing that Sylvia hated more than another, it was being kissed by Mrs. Hill, and she never failed to show her dislike of the salute after a fashion, which there was no misunderstanding.)

"Well, my dear," the good-natured woman began, "I hope you enjoyed your concert the other day, though I can't help thinking that you would have enjoyed our little dance more. But I know you went to please Muriel, and that was very kind of you, and the next dance we give shall be in the evening, which I daresay you will like better. Johnny is very anxious to consult you about a cotillon. Do you think we could undertake such a thing with any prospect of success?"

"Not if he led it," answered Sylvia, gloomily.

Sir Harry Brewster was taking leave of Muriel, who was receiving his adieux with a dignified stateliness by which he did not seem to be in the least abashed.

"So sorry to have missed Mr. Wentworth," Sylvia heard him saying; "but I hope I may be more fortunate another time."

Then he favored Sylvia with a valedictory smile, picked his way deftly through the obstructive pieces of furniture with which the drawing-room was encumbered, and departed.

"What a fine-looking man!" Mrs. Hill exclaimed. "Who is he? Where did you meet him? Would you like me to send him an invitation to our dance? Any friend of yours would be most welcome, as I'm sure you know."

It fell to Muriel's lot to explain that Sir Harry Brewster was not a friend, only a very slight acquaintance, and that she certainly did not know him well enough to ask or accept invitations on his behalf. Sylvia remained disdainfully silent. Sir Harry, of course, would never dream of going to Mrs. Hill's house, and it struck her as an unwarrantable and provoking piece of presumption on the latter's part even to suggest such a thing.

But a much greater act of presumption was about to

be perpetrated by one who, whatever may have been his failings, did not often sin in that direction, and Sylvia's breath was fairly taken away when Johnny Hill, speaking in a subdued, but solemn and censorious voice, said:

"I was very sorry to see that man here; I hope you didn't ask him to call."

She was really too astonished to be angry. "My good boy," said she with calm contempt, "what do you know about Sir Harry Brewster? And what business have you to be sorry or glad because he comes here?"

"I am sorry because I can't help it," answered Johnny doggedly. "As for what I know about him, it isn't a secret—although you haven't been told, I suppose."

Sylvia's curiosity was too much for her dignity. Mrs. Hill was deeply engaged in conversation with Muriel; Johnny had seated himself in front of her, with his elbows on his knees, and was looking anxiously into her face; there was no fear that any communication which he might have to make would be overheard, and she did very much want to know of what mysterious crime Sir Harry Brewster had been guilty.

"Speak on," said she composedly; "you have evidently got hold of some choice bit of scandal which will choke you unless you are allowed to utter it, and rather than see you drop off your chair in a fit, I will listen to you. Only it doesn't follow that I shall believe you, you know."

CHAPTER VIII.

"You may refuse to believe me," Johnny said; "but you will be obliged to believe what I am going tell to you, because it can be so easily proved. It is just as well known us anything else that has been published in all the newspapers, and I can't understand why Lady Morecambe did not warn—speak to you, I mean about it. Sir Harry Brewster was divorced from his wife two years ago."

Sylvia's color changed; but she laughed with very fair show of indifference. "So that is the great mystery, is it?" said she. "Well, I don't see what concern his matrimonial misfortunes are of mine; though of course I am sorry to hear that he didn't manage to hit it off with his wife. It was all her fault, I daresay; it generally is the wife's fault in these cases."

Johnny was too meek to suggest that Miss Sylvia's knowledge of the causes which commonly bring husbands and wives into the Divorce court was probably limited; he only replied, "It was not so in this case. There was not a word to be said against Lady Brewster, and Sir Harry scarcely attempted to defend himself. He only denied certain charges because—well, I can't go into it with you; but there are certain charges which a man is supposed to deny. Whether they were true or not, quite enough was proved to make the poor woman sure of getting her divorce. It was a very bad case," added Johnny, shaking his head solemnly.

"How you enjoy saying that!" exclaimed Sylvia, irritably. "You couldn't look more sanctimonious or more —more idiotic if you were a newly-fledged curate!"

Poor Johnny winced. He was very young; he naturally believed himself to be thoroughly acquainted with the world and its ways; it was not agreeable to him to

be called sanctimonious, and it was even less agreeable to be likened to a curate.

"It *was* a very bad case," he repeated, rather sullenly, "anybody whom you choose to ask will tell you so. As for me, I assure you I don't at all enjoy talking about such an unpleasant subject."

"Don't you," returned Sylvia, airily; "then we won't talk about it any more."

At this unexpected rejoinder Johnny Hill gnawed his nails—a bad habit of which his mother had vainly endeavored to cure him.

"All right," he answered, slowly; "only I hope you understand now that Sir Harry Brewster isn't the kind of man who has any business to be intimate here."

Sylvia pointed an admonishing forefinger at him. "If you mean to go on like this, Johnny," said she, "I shall certainly understand that you have no business to be intimate here. Do you really imagine that we shall allow you to revise our visiting list for us?"

"Of course not; only, you see, you hadn't heard about Sir Harry, and I daresay Miss Wentworth hasn't heard either. I'll just say a word to her before I go, and——"

Sylvia's small fingers gripped his arm with a force and suddenness which made him jump. "If you do," she interrupted, "I will never speak to you again! Yes: I mean it, I will never speak to you again—never! Now, you needn't run away with the idea that I care a bit more for Sir Harry Brewster than I should for any other man who was nice and entertaining; but it so happens that he is the only nice and entertaining man of my acquaintance, and I am not going to be deprived of him just because he has a divorced wife somewhere or other. What difference would it make to me if he had twenty divorced wives?"

"I can't help thinking that that kind of thing *does* make a difference," said Johnny.

"It isn't a question of what you can't help thinking; the only person whose thoughts upon the subject are of any consequence is papa. You say everybody knows about Sir Harry; so I suppose he knows. Yet, you see, he doesn't forbid him the house."

"Of, if Mr. Wentworth approves of his coming here, there is no more to be said."

"Then don't say any more—at any rate not to Muriel. She is so strait-laced that a word or two would be enough to make her rush off to papa, full of horror and dismay; and then, for the sake of peace and quietness, he would say, 'Oh, very well; tell the servants not to let him in again.' And if that misfortune were to happen again through your fussy interference, I do most solemnly declare, Johnny, that I would never address another syllable to you for the rest of my days! You might talk and talk till you had no voice left; but I should remain as silent as the tomb."

Johnny ceased biting his nails, sighed heavily and said, "As you please!"

It was, after all, true that Mr. Wentworth could not be ignorant of Sir Harry's Brewster's history, and if Mr. Wentworth did not know that the man had been there that afternoon, he would certainly hear of it soon. It might also be true—Johnny tried to hope it was—that Sir Harry was attractive to Sylvia for no other reason than that he was entertaining. Finally, the girl was quite capable, if disobeyed, of carrying out her dreadful threat. So Johnny surrendered, and to reward him for his submission, Sylvia not only bestowed a smile upon him, but, snatching a flower—any flower—out of the nearest vase, stuck it into his buttonhole for him.

"There!" said she; "that is because you are a good boy."

It was at this juncture that Mrs. Hill, who had been saying good-bye to Muriel for a matter of five minutes, turned round to beckon to her son; and greatly pleased was she to see what an honor was bestowed upon him. Johnny was patient and dutiful; yet there were moments when he felt that his mother was nothing short of a scourge, and his unerring instinct told him that one of these was now at hand.

"Oh, what a lovely flower!" Mrs. Hill exclaimed. "Sylvia dear, how very kind of you! But it is too bad to rob you!—and with flowers at such a price as they are now!"

"I don't think this one could have cost a very large sum," answered Sylvia, demurely; "it's only a primula, and I'm sorry to see that it is a withered one into the bargain. Still," she added, turning to Johnny, with mock humility, "such as it is!"

The unhappy Johnny, conscious of being held up to ridicule, reddened, gobbled and shaped a hasty course for the door, colliding heavily with a table on his way. His mother followed him, smiling all over and thoroughly satisfied with the success of her visit.

Muriel could not help joining in the burst of laughter to which Sylvia gave way as soon as the door had closed, though she felt bound to utter the usual remonstrance, "Why do you do such things? Why do you hurt the poor fellow's feelings in that way? What is the fun of it?"

"Can you sit there holding your sides and ask me what is the fun of it?" returned Sylvia. "All the same, I am innocent. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, and I'm sure I didn't expect to get any fun out of him. It was all that absurd old woman's doing."

"But what made you give him a flower?" persisted Muriel.

"I gave him a flower because I thought he deserved it," answered Sylvia, oracularly; and perhaps it was because she did not wish to be questioned any further that she left the room.

Her face changed as soon as she was out upon the staircase, and by the time that she reached her bedroom all trace of merriment had vanished from it. She threw herself down in a capacious arm-chair by the fireside (throughout the winter the fire was kept burning in Sylvia's bedroom), and with her chin resting upon her hand, began to think over the disagreeable news that she had just heard. Being now alone, she admitted that it was disagreeable. She would not have minded hearing, in general terms, that Sir Harry Brewster had led a wild, dissipated, extravagant life; as much might be said of a great many heroes and fine fellows. But this, somehow, seemed to be a rather different affair. This implied—or at least she supposed it did—conduct quite the reverse of

heroic. And yet what right had she to condemn him without having heard both sides of the case? She resolved that she would find out the truth—if only she knew how to set about it! She could not condescend to catechise Johnny Hill; it would be rather a risk to question her father, and Lady Morecambe was out of reach.

"I know what I will do," she said at length, tapping with her little foot in a determined manner upon the hearth-rug; "I will ask Sir Harry himself!"

At the same moment Muriel, downstairs in the drawing-room, was confiding some of her perplexities to Mr. Wentworth, who had just come in.

"Sir Harry Brewster called this afternoon and stayed a long time," she was saying. "He showed in the plainest possible way that he had come to see Sylvia: indeed, he scarcely spoke to anybody else. I didn't like it, and he saw that I didn't like it, and he was amused—which I must say I think was rather impertinent of him."

"I can find it in my heart to forgive him for that," observed Mr. Wentworth, tranquilly. "There is something about your way of demeaning yourself when you are annoyed, my dear, which is of a nature to overcome the gloom of the most saturnine temperaments. I couldn't exactly explain what it is; but I assure you it's irresistible. A mixture of frigid dignity and——"

"Oh, never mind!" interrupted Muriel; "it isn't my demeanor that signifies, but Sylvia's; and I am sure she likes this man. I wish you would tell me what it is that is wrong about him."

"I'm afraid I can't. I am extremely modest, as you know, and the details of his career are scarcely fitted for the ears of a young person. However, I may mention that his wife divorced him—and showed all the requisite causes for so doing. *All* of them, you understand."

Muriel flushed indignantly. "That includes personal violence, doesn't it?" she asked.

Mr. Wentworth nodded. "As far as I remember, she proved a box on the ear—and once, I think, he threw something at her. It may have been a chair or it may have been only a newspaper; anyhow, it was sufficient for her purpose."

"And quite sufficient," added Muriel, "to justify you in forbidding him ever to enter this house again."

"Oh, I don't know about that: he hasn't thrown anything at me yet. You see I may be over-sensitive, but I confess that I shrink from making myself so supremely ridiculous as to suggest that I am afraid of my daughter's becoming enamored of him."

"There would be nothing ridiculous at all in the suggestion," returned Muriel, shortly. "It would be a great deal more ridiculous to expect that she will ever become enamored of Johnny Hill."

"I must take the liberty of differing from you, my dear. Little girls don't fall in love with men who are well on the wrong side of forty, and Sir Harry Brewsters, when they marry a second time, espouse foolish widows with large fortunes. It isn't worth while to disregard all the known laws of human nature for the sake of providing yourself with an imaginary trouble."

So saying Mr. Wentworth sauntered off to dress for dinner, leaving Muriel to knit her brows and sigh impatiently and wish she were less impotent. Impotent, however, she undoubtedly was, as she discovered later in the evening, when she took occasion to say to Sylvia: "I hope we shall see no more of that Sir Harry Brewster. It seems that he is divorced from his wife, whom he treated disgracefully. Your father has been telling me about it."

"Oh, I know that," answered Sylvia. "At least, I know he is divorced; I don't know about the disgraceful treatment. Was papa angry at his having called?"

And since truth compelled her aunt to confess that Mr. Wentworth had not been angry, she resumed: "Then I really don't care whether he is married or single or neither. I hope we shall see a great deal more of him. I think most likely we shall too."

This slightly defiant prediction was destined to be fulfilled; for a few days later came a note from Sir Harry Brewster to say that he had secured a box at the Lyceum theatre, which he hoped that Mr. and Miss Wentworth and "Miss Sylvia" would do him the honor to occupy, and also that he had ordered supper to be in readiness after the play, at a certain well-known hotel.

It is by no means certain that Mr. Wentworth, who disliked turning out after dinner and who, in the matter of dramatic entertainments, infinitely preferred comic opera to Shakespeare, would have accepted the above invitation, had he not felt a malicious curiosity to watch his sister's treatment of the hero of a hundred scandals. As it was, he decided to go; and against his decision there was no appeal. He was amply indemnified for some sacrifice of personal comfort by spending a very enjoyable evening. Muriel, it is true, disappointed expectation, for she was simply cold, monosyllabic and unapproachable; but Sir Harry proved a delightful companion. He may have tried to be agreeable to Mr. Wentworth, but if so the effort was not apparent. He was a good talker; he could tell a capital story without taking too long about it; above all, he was a most appreciative listener. With Sylvia his manner was perfect. He displayed just so much admiration for her as a man of his years is privileged to display; there was a touch of old fashioned courtesy in his attentions to her; he carefully abstained from drawing her into anything like a private conversation, and if he did not altogether satisfy the young lady, he at least convinced her father that he was perfectly safe.

The supper, too, was above all praise. Mr. Wentworth candidly avowed his amazement that such cooking and such wine should be procurable in any London Hotel.

"But I'm an old fogey," he said; "I can't pretend to have kept abreast of the times. I don't know how many years it is since I sat down to supper anywhere."

"My dear Mr. Wentworth," returned Sir Harry, "if you are an old fogey, it is only too plain that I must be another. However, your daughter is kind enough to say that I don't look like one, and I can honestly pass the compliment on to you. After all, I say we shall both of us be able to enjoy good things for some time to come yet."

It might, at all events, be safely predicted that neither of them would neglect any opportunity of so doing which might present itself; and the circumstances being of a nature to promote a certain jollity and recklessness, there

was no great difficuly about arranging that driving expedition upon which Sir Harry had set his heart. Muriel neither consented nor refused to join the proposed party. Conscious of being a wet blanket, yet unable to conceal feelings which there could be no possible use in displaying, she was almost as much displeased with herself as she was with her companions. For Sir Harry Brewster she had conceived a strong, and perhaps somewhat unreasonable antipathy.

Whether his intentions to Sylvia were seriously meant or not she could not tell; but it was beyond doubt that he was turning the girl's head, and it was extremely likely that he was preparing a great deal of unhappiness for her. Her brother's good-humored selfishness filled her with indignation. No help was to be hoped for from him; and as for herself, what could she do? She was without authority and without influence.

"The only thing that makes me of the slightest value in the world," she reflected, bitterly, "is my money; and even money won't cure all evils. I wonder how large a bribe Sir Harry Brewster would ask to take himself off—and never come back any more!"

Now, Muriel Wentworth, if she had in some respects an ill-regulated mind, was no fool; so she refrained from futile remonstrances and reached her bedroom that night without having put anybody in a rage. From the moment that her brother chose to make a friend of Sir Harry Brewster there was nothing to be done, except to await the development of events and hope for the best. Some fine morning he would take fright—for he wished his daughter to marry well, and certainly, he could not wish her to lose her heart to a man who was out of the question as a husband—but until he realized the danger it would be vain to point it out to him. Nevertheless, there was something very humiliating and very unsatisfactory in being so powerless.

On the following afternoon her thoughts were diverted into a rather more agreeable channel by a visit from Colonel Medhurst, who announced that he had come to ask whether she would care about inspecting "Compton's establishment." It appeared that Mrs. Sumner, the lady

at whose house Muriel had made Colonel Medhurst's acquaintance, and who was more or less interested in the Society of St. Francis, had offered to escort him thither.

"And we thought," the ingenuous Colonel added, "that perhaps you might like to accompany us, if you haven't been there already. Have you any other engagement for Thursday afternoon?"

No extraordinary powers of divination were required to conjecture that this proposition had originated with Colonel Medhurst, not with Mrs. Sumner; but in truth its course was a matter of complete indifference to Muriel, who had more than one reason for welcoming it.

"Thursday would suit me very well, thank you," she answered. "My brother and Sylvia are going to drive down into the country with a friend on that day, and I shall be glad of any pretext for escaping the excursion. Besides, I am very anxious to see Mr. Compton's establishment, as you call it."

"Ought it not to be called an establishment? It seems to be a brotherhood and a sisterhood and a hospital and I don't know what else—all under one roof. Anyhow, I also am anxious to see it and prepared to admire it. Not that I approve of Compton's principles, you know."

"So you gave me to understand. But perhaps you haven't altogether grasped them yet."

"And you? Well, we'll bring an impartial criticism to bear upon him and all his works, Miss Wentworth. He has promised to meet us and act as showman, so that we shall have every advantage."

This also was welcome news to Muriel. She was not quite sure whether she wanted to snub Mr. Compton or to consult him; but she was quite sure that she wanted to see him again, and her satisfaction showed itself in the form of gracious kindliness to her visitor, who went away after a time, very well pleased with his reception.

CHAPTER IX.

THE large red-brick building which was the head-quarters of the Society of St. Francis, stood in a quiet little square within earshot of the ceaseless traffic of Regent Street and Oxford Street. It included within its walls, as Colonel Medhurst had truly said, accommodation for the male and female members of the confraternity, as well as a hospital for children. It also contained a richly-decorated chapel and a well-stocked library; so that the casual visitor might reasonably infer—and usually did infer—that its finances were in a flourishing condition. As a matter of fact, however, the Society, like all charitable societies which have any vitality in them, found its funds inadequate to the demands made upon them; and that was one reason why Mr. Compton, despite his multifarious occupations, felt bound to welcome casual visitors. Any hasty and erroneous impressions which they might have formed could be corrected by an inspection of his accounts, and after the existence of a deficit had been made clear to them they could hardly go away, without leaving some pecuniary memento behind them.

"That is the worst of going to see Mr. Compton," remarked Mrs. Sumner to Muriel, who was sitting beside her in her open carriage, Colonel Medhurst facing them, with his back to the horses; "one really isn't rich enough to do it often. It's almost as bad as going to the Home for Lost Dogs. One can't buy all the poor dogs and one can't provide for all the sick children; so that one would consult one's own comfort by remaining away. However, you will both of you be immensely interested, I know; and if you empty your purses you will empty them in a good cause."

Colonel Medhurst examined the contents of his waistcoat pocket. "Two pounds, three and sixpence," said he, meditatively. "Compton will have to be satisfied with

thirty shillings, because I must reserve myself a little change to play pool with at the club after you ladies have dismissed me."

"Is that the way in which you generally employ your spare time?" asked Muriel, with a touch of scorn.

"I should feel truly grateful if you could tell me of a better," answered the Colonel, good-humoredly; "but I assure you it is no such easy matter for a soldier on leave to find occupations for himself in London. I haven't many friends, and I can't afford to train down to the country and hunt. Now, I wonder what you would do, Miss Wentworth, if you were in my place."

But, as it was not Muriel's business to imagine herself in Colonel Medhurst's place or to devise employment for him, she only shrugged her shoulders. She was, after all, very much in his predicament, without his excuse, and perhaps it is quite as unprofitable to doze over afternoon tea as to play billiards at a club. Mr. Compton, to be sure, had hinted that he could find work for her; but he had been so uncomplimentary, and had shown so plainly that he did not care about being bothered with her, that she hesitated to remind him of that half promise. She was, in truth, by no means disinclined to quarrel with the man to whose direction she had been willing to submit her fortune and her future; one does not make such offers as that with the expectation of being benevolently smiled at.

However, when the carriage stopped before the iron gates, surmounted by a cross, which gave admittance to the Franciscan edifice, and when Mr. Compton, attired in a black cassock with a cord knotted round his waist, came down to the steps to receive his visitors, it was evident that no immediate occasion for quarrelling with him was likely to present itself. He shook hands with them all; he was very polite and pleasant, and if there was something in his manner which suggested the idea that he might be rather in a hurry, he made no verbal admission to that effect.

"I am quite at your service," he cut short Mrs. Sumner's apologies by saying, "and the children, as you know, are always delighted to see you. I must thank you in

their name for the toys that you so kindly sent. But before we go to their part of the house, I dare say Miss Wentworth would like to have a look at our quarters and at the chapel."

The corridor through which he led the way with Mrs. Sumner was a narrow one, so that Muriel and Colonel Medhurst perforce brought up the rear. At the entrance of the chapel Compton removed his biretta and made a genuflexion to the altar; whereupon Mrs. Sumner, who always endeavored to do the right thing, went through that somewhat ungraceful form of obeisance which is commonly known as a "Royalty bob." Muriel did not imitate her, but gazed up the dark aisle, over which there hovered a faint smell of incense, and sighed wistfully. How happy, she thought, must the men and women be, who, after toiling all the day in the outer world, could withdraw to such a peaceful, silent and beautiful place of worship as this!

The chapel was a really good specimen of the modern variety of Gothic architecture. It was very ornate; but the effect of the variously tinted marbles, the stained glass and the mosaics was not inharmonious, and the richness of the coloring was subdued by the dim light. Compton pointed out some frescoes, the work of a celebrated artist and the gift of one of his wealthy patronesses; he also drew attention to a few well-executed brasses which had been presented as memorials. No guide could have been more courteous; but both in the chapel and in the library, whither they presently repaired, Muriel, watching him, was impressed with the conviction that the sooner his task was discharged the better he would be pleased.

Two smooth-shaven young clergymen, dressed in the same costume as their chief, were writing at the broad table which ran down the centre of the library. They rose as the strangers entered, were duly introduced and uttered a few commonplaces. One of them apparently asked for some instructions from Mr. Compton, which were delivered to him in a rapid, authoritative undertone.

"Our friend is a bit of a martinet, I suspect," whispered

Colonel Medhurst to Muriel, "and quite right too. I know by experience that you can't command even a well-disciplined regiment without asserting your personal authority pretty firmly, and I can imagine what it must be to keep a herd of excitable devotees, male and female, under control. He seems to do it, though."

Whether he did it or not, he certainly seemed to be invested with despotic powers. All the time that he was exhibiting arrangements of the institution—the refectory, the waiting-rooms, the scantily-furnished bedrooms set apart for the use of such members of the staff as were working in London—he was being continually interrupted by messengers who came to ask for orders or to hand him papers which required his signature. All this he took as a matter of course. It did not worry him; but it discouraged Muriel, who began to perceive that there was little hope of her obtaining so much as five minutes of private conversation with so busy a man.

Possibly, however, he wished to speak a few words to her, or guessed that she wished to speak to him; for when he had led the way into a bright airy ward where some twenty or thirty children were lying in their cots, he fell back, and joined her.

"Now, Medhurst," said he, "I will leave Mrs. Sumner to introduce you to her little friends. My nose is quite put out of joint when I bring her here, because her advent is always preceded by a shower of toys."

Colonel Medhurst smilingly obeyed what was not so much a hint as a command; and then this peremptory little priest began, without any preliminaries:

"Well, are you still in the same mind?"

Muriel's face lightened up with pleased surprise. "Certainly I am," she answered. "And have you changed yours? Are you willing to admit me?"

"Oh, dear, no! I told you there could be no immediate question of that—probably no ultimate question. I was only wondering whether I had completely choked you off by what I know you considered my ingratitude."

"I never thought you ungrateful; I asked a favor, I didn't confer one. But I did think and I think still, that the reasons which you gave were insufficient. You

yourself would think so if you realized what my position is and what sort of life I lead. I am utterly useless at home; my brother wouldn't miss me, and I suppose am too young or too weak-minded or something to be of any service to my niece. I can only stand and look on at things which—well, there is no time to explain; but sometimes I feel it almost unbearable."

He nodded. "Yes, I know; I have made some inquiries and I understand how you are situated rather better than I did. Still I couldn't advise you to desert your post even if it were as unsatisfactory as you make out—which it isn't. Are you fond of children?"

"Yes; I think I get on better with them, as a rule, than with adults."

"Then you might sometimes come here and help to amuse these waifs and strays. Those whom you see are the best cases, though some of them are incurable, I am afraid. We have another ward which we think it best to leave entirely under the charge of the Sisters; but here visitors are always welcome and are always a help to us. If you will look in occasionally it will fill up your spare time and may do something towards clearing your mind of morbid ideas. I can conscientiously assure you that you will be of use by coming."

"Thank you," answered Muriel; "I will come. But is that to be all?"

"That is all that I can do for you at present. You imagine that you have a vocation. You may be right or you may be wrong—most likely you are wrong. But in any case you can't expect us to accept your mere assertion; it is for you to give us proofs, and convincing proofs. Do you understand?"

It was not a very encouraging, perhaps not a very polite speech; but Muriel fancied that there was a slightly more sympathizing look in the speaker's eyes than she had been able to discern there during their first interview. Besides, she was less exacting now than she had been then.

"I understand," she answered, "that you insist upon my starting from the lowest step of the ladder. I suppose I have no right to complain; but—do you take these excessive precautions in every case?"

"Not in cases where they would be excessive. Now Mrs. Sumner has made her round, I see, and is anxious to be released. I will give instructions that you are always to be admitted when you come here. One of the Sisters will receive you."

It was evident that he was quite as anxious to be released as Mrs. Sumner could be. He conducted the party downstairs, accepted Colonel Medhurst's dole with thanks and took his leave in the space of a very few minutes.

"Isn't he quite wonderful?" Mrs. Sumner exclaimed, as she stepped into her carriage. "So full of energy, and so simple and unaffected with it all! Of course one can't help regretting his extreme notions, and it seems a great pity that Lord Chepstow should have quarrelled with him; still if he were not so unlike the rest of the world, I daresay he wouldn't be so interesting. Shall I take you straight home, Muriel? I have some visits to pay; but we will go to Brook Street first, if you like."

Muriel said she wanted a little exercise and would perfer to walk home; whereupon Colonel Medhurst promptly offered to escort her. He looked incredulous when he was assured that young ladies required no escort in the streets of London nowadays; it had not been so previous to his departure for India, he said. Moreover, setting other considerations aside, how was she to get across Regent Street without somebody to take care that she was not run over by an omnibus? If Muriel had objected to his company, his representations would doubtless have proved ineffectual; but she did not object to it. It was very much the same thing to her whether she walked home with Colonel Medhurst or alone; perhaps, if anything, she had a slight preference in favor of the society of an old friend of Mr. Compton's.

However, Mr. Compton's old friend was disposed to be critical rather than laudatory.

"Good works are good works," said he, "and I am glad to see the children made comfortable and happy, poor little souls, and—and Compton is a stirring orator. But the whole thing seems to be intended as a means towards an end, and I can't quite gather what that end is. Compton takes a good deal of trouble to keep it in the background."

CHAPTER X.

To go straight to head-quarters for information sounds like a wise principle to act upon; and indeed the system is said to have been adopted with success by certain eminent statesmen and diplomatists. Yet, if the truth were known, it might possibly be found that the statesmen have not wholly disdained other means of arriving at their ends; because, unfortunately, the desire of the candid inquirer for a plain statement of facts is not always shared at head-quarters. No one, therefore, will be surprised to hear that Sylvia, in spite of her bold resolution to interrogate Sir Harry Brewster as to the circumstances connected with his divorce, knew very little more about them at the end of three weeks than she had done at the beginning. She did, indeed, summon up courage to put a point-blank question to him; but his reply was such as to render further questions almost impossible. It was too true he said that he was a divorced man; but Miss Sylvia would understand that he could not talk much to her upon such a subject. He might add that it was an excessively painful one to him.

After that, what more could she do? She ventured upon an occasional hint; but these he ignored, and finally she said to herself that she really did not care to pry into matters which were none of her business. The past was past and had better be forgotten: the present was quite enjoyable enough to content her.

If the present had not contented her no blame could have attached to Sir Harry Brewster, who was indefatigable in devising schemes for her amusement.

Although he did not come very often to the house, he contrived to make arrangements for meeting Sylvia almost every day of the week, and what was still more clever of him was that he also contrived to secure the

necessary escort in the person of her father. Mr. Wentworth did not mind incurring a little trouble and inconvenience for the pleasure of Sir Harry's society. Sir Harry was not only himself entertaining, but had a number of entertaining friends whom it was a change and an amusement to meet. As for Muriel's apprehensions and warnings, they were preposterous upon the face of them: impossibilities do not occur, and Mr. Wentworth had a comfortable habit of treating all disagreeable occurrences as impossible.

Muriel herself ended by shutting her eyes to what, after all, was not obtruded upon her notice. When one is helpless, one may as well hope for the best: moreover, she had now a good deal more to occupy her thoughts than she had hitherto had. Every day she spent several hours with the sick children, whose affections she had no difficulty in gaining: the sisters made her welcome and were not averse to chatting with her about the rules of the Society to which they belonged and in the principles of which they had the firmest faith; from time to time she encountered Mr. Compton, who was always in a hurry, yet never passed her without saying a few friendly words, and she had come to look forward to the visits of Colonel Medhurst, who frequently happened to drop in about tea-time. Upon the whole, her life just now was pleasant to her, notwithstanding the modesty of its immediate aims; and, that being so, she was disposed to take a more sanguine view of the proceedings and prospects of others.

One day Sylvia received a letter which ought to have delighted her, yet, somehow or other, failed to produce that effect, and the contents of which she did not at once communicate to Muriel.

"We are going to have our annual ball next Wednesday," Lady Morecambe wrote, "and there will be two others in the neighborhood in the course of the week; so you see the time has come for you to redeem your promise. We shall expect you on Monday, and I will undertake to provide you with as many good partners as you can wish for."

Instead of jumping for joy, Sylvia found herself

wondering whether she could not find some excuse for declining this seductive invitation, and it must be acknowledged that at first she was a little surprised by her own hesitation. However, she accounted for it by reflecting that she really had not more than one ball-dress fit to wear and that she could not afford two new ones; also that balls were poor fun when you hadn't an idea of who your partners would be; finally, that Sir Harry Brewster had promised to take her to see a polo match on the day named by Lady Morecambe. The approach of the post hour found her still irresolute, and she was sitting at her aunt's writing-table in the drawing-room, biting the end of her pen and sighing, when Sir Harry Brewster was announced.

Sir Harry, who was always careful to observe the laws of conventionality, hastened to explain that he had asked for Miss Wentworth and had been told that she was at home.

"One Miss Wentworth is at home," answered Sylvia, laughing, "and the other will be soon. Sit down and help me invent a polite fib. Lady Morecambe has asked me to go down to them next Monday for their ball, and I don't think I want to go. What shall I say to her?"

"When I don't want to accept on invitation," observed Sir Harry, "I always say I'm afraid I can't manage it; but perhaps ladies are expected to give reasons. Why don't you want to go, though? It's sure to be well done, and I expect you would enjoy it." He added presently, "I'll go, if you will?"

"Have you been invited?" asked Sylvia, with a sudden change of countenance.

"No; but that's a trifle. I'll get Morecambe to ask me."

Sylvia looked down and began to draw patterns upon the sheet of paper before her. "Do you know," she said hesitatingly at length, "I don't think Lady Morecambe quite—likes you."

"Oh, if that's all, I'm sure she doesn't," he replied. "Lady Morecambe is—shall we say prejudiced against me?" Then, perceiving what he was probably meant to understand, he resumed: "I shan't beg for my invita-

tion until the last moment, you know, and I shan't apply to her ladyship at all. Meanwhile, please write an acceptance. I'll undertake to say that when you enter the ball-room you will find me on the spot, waiting to claim a dance."

From the above fragment of dialogue it will be seen that three weeks had brought about a decided change of relations between these two persons, and that Sir Harry had, consciously or unconsciously, ceased to pose as the benevolent admirer of mature years. Sylvia scribbled off the letter, pausing every now and again to throw a remark over her shoulder.

"I don't know why Lady Morecambe should be prejudiced against you," was one of these.

"Oh, I think you do," responded Sir Harry, tranquilly. "In a genera' way of speaking, the British matron is prejudiced against me, and the British matron is not wrong. I don't complain—but at the same time I must confess that I don't care. So long as you don't share the good lady's prejudices, she is very welcome to them."

"But perhaps I should," observed Sylvia turning a somewhat uneasy countenance towards him, "if——"

"If you were as well acquainted with my misdeeds as she is? Very likely you would; and that is why I shall not confess them to you. I will only take the liberty of pleading that I am not quite so black as I am painted."

During the period of silence which followed this audacious assertion Muriel came in and recognized the visitor with a look of annoyed surprise which did not escape his notice.

"You will have to dismiss your butler, Miss Wentworth," he said; "his mind is too logical for his position. You have evidently given him a general order to the effect that you are always out when you are at home, and a deductive process of reasoning has led him to conclude that you must be at home when you are out. Anyhow, he assured me that you were at home, and upon the faith of that statement I followed him upstairs. I can't pretend that I regret having done so, especially as I arrived just in time to persuade Miss Sylvia that she ought to accept an invitation to Lady Morecambe's ball which

she was thinking of refusing. Nobody understands how to make a country ball go off better than Lady Morecambe."

"I had not heard anything about it; Sylvia did not mention it to me," said Muriel, with a perplexed look. And then as her niece vouchsafed no remark: "Are *you* going to this ball, Sir Harry?" she inquired.

"I am sorry to say that I haven't been asked," replied Sir Harry, imperturbably.

Sylvia bent over the envelope which she was addressing. She was perhaps a little ashamed of her confederate's *suppressio veri;* but on the other hand, the fact that he was making himself her confederate was not disagreeable to her. As for Muriel she both felt relieved and looked so.

"Of course you will go, Sylvia," she said. "When did you ever refuse an invitation to a ball?"

"Oh, I am going," answered Sylvia. "Only I doubted about it because Lady Morecambe says there are to be two other dances, and I have neither frocks nor money to buy them."

"If that is all, I'll provide the frocks," said Muriel, who indeed was in the habit of supplementing her niece's allowance by frequent gifts of that description.

In the innocence of her heart, she felt quite grateful to Sir Harry for having urged this change of scene upon Sylvia, and began to think that, bad as he was, she might have wronged him by suspecting him of designs which only a hardened scoundrel could have entertained. It was, therefore, with unwonted graciousness that she said: "I hope you will stay and have a cup of tea with us."

"He will be delighted," answered Sylvia for him. "I say so to save him from telling a direct falsehood. Sir Harry would prefer a sherry and bitters; he doesn't really like tea; no *man* does. Not even your long, solemn soldier, Muriel, though he meekly swallows about a quart of it every afternoon to please you."

Muriel slightly displeased, was beginning to say that neither Sir Harry Brewster nor anyone else gave her the least pleasure by swallowing what he did not like, when she was interrupted by the entrance of the long solemn

soldier, whose arrival at that hour had, to tell the truth, become a matter of almost daily occurrence.

The candles had not yet been lighted; so that Colonel Medhurst did not notice the presence of a stranger until after he had exchanged a few remarks with Muriel and had turned to shake hands with Sylvia. The latter, since her aunt said nothing, took upon herself to accomplish an introduction by which both men appeared to be disagreeably affected. Sir Harry, on hearing the name of Colonel Medhurst, rose hastily, made a half bow and looked around for his hat, while the other standing stock-still, clenched his fists and muttered something suspiciously like an imprecation. There was a brief pause; after which the colonel, whose voice was trembling with anger, said:

"I have not tried to meet you, Sir Harry Brewster; I know that I should gain nothing except a little personal satisfaction, from giving you the thrashing that you so richly deserve. But since chance has brought us together in this very unexpected way, I will take this opportunity of telling you that you are no gentleman, and that you have no business to be in any lady's house. I am sure if Miss Wentworth knew as much about you as I know, she would not permit you to enter hers."

"My good man," returned Sir Harry, calmly, "there is one thing which certainly ought not to take place in any lady's house, and that is a brawl. Here is my card. If you wish to thrash me and think you can do it, by all means call upon me at any hour which it may please you to appoint; but, for your own sake, don't indulge in strong language under circumstances which make it impossible for me to answer you."

Colonel Medhurst was one of those quiet sensible men who very seldom lose their temper and who consequently have had little practice in the difficult task of self-control.

"I am not going to treat you as if you were a gentleman," he retorted, forgetting that he was asked to show some consideration for his hostess, not for his enemy. "Wherever I meet you I shall say what I said just now, now, and, as you very well know, I can justify my words."

"In that case," observed Sir Harry, "it is evident that one or other of us must retire. I will leave you to explain and excuse your behavior to Miss Wentworth. No doubt, if she thinks it worth while, she will allow me to state my own case some other time."

He then took his leave in a manner which was not devoid of quiet dignity; and, as the slight pressure which he ventured to give to Sylvia's fingers was distinctly returned, he went away without much fear as to ultimate results.

Yet his predicament was really an awkward one, as he might have realized, had he not been rendered a little dull of comprehension by the comparative facility with which he had regained his position in society, after a temporary period of eclipse. Medhurst when he was left alone with the ladies, grew a little cooler, though he was still much agitated.

"I suppose I ought to make you an apology," he began; "I ought not perhaps, to have brought about a scene in your drawing-room. But I think you will forgive me when I tell you that that man was my sister's husband, and that she was compelled to obtain a divorce from him while I was away in India. You won't wish or expect me to give you all the particulars of the case; but I may say this—that she proved personal cruelty. He struck her on more than one occasion before the servants. And the worst of it is that he has not been punished; he was glad to be set free. It is she, and she alone, who has suffered."

"I don't think you owe us any apology, Colonel Medhurst," said Muriel, who looked penitent and ashamed. "I knew—my brother told me—about the divorce; but I didn't know who Sir Harry's wife had been."

"Your brother told you, and yet you continued to receive him!" exclaimed Medhurst. "Well—I am surprised. I must say that I am surprised." Muriel, feeling that it would be a little undignified to plead her own repeatedly expressed reluctance to receive the culprit, remained silent; but Sylvia said:

"Why are we to condemn Sir Harry unheard? Of course you are angry and you won't admit that there

can be anything to be said for him; but there *are* always two sides to a case."

"It is impossible to explain away facts which have been proved in a court of law," returned Mr. Medhurst, coldly. "If you will excuse me I will say good-night now. I am sorry that this encounter should not have taken place elsewhere; but as regards what I said to that man I have nothing to retract and nothing to regret."

"I can't compliment your friend upon his manners," remarked Sylvia when the door had closed behind the irate Colonel. "One may forgive him for having insulted Sir Harry, though perhaps it would have been better form to wait until they were both out in the street; but I don't know what right he had to be so rude to *us*."

"He wasn't rude," answered Muriel rather sadly, for she felt sure that her friend would now be her friend no longer—"he was only offended, and he had a right to be that. We ought not to receive Sir Harry Brewster; I have thought so all along."

"Papa doesn't think so, it seems," returned Sylvia, preparing herself for battle; "nor does Lady Morecambe. What have we to do with the sins which our acquaintances may have committed in days gone by? I suppose that even Colonel Medhurst, if he were put into the confessional, would have to plead guilty to a few peccadilloes."

But Muriel declined the fray. She reserved what she had to say for her brother, with whom she sought an interview in his study before she went to bed and to whom she gave an account of the afternoon's events.

"Dear me, what an odd coincidence," remarked Mr. Wentworth, after patiently hearing her out. "Now that you mention it, I think I do recollect that the lady's maiden name was Medhurst. Well, of course we mustn't let these two fire-eaters come to fisticuffs here. You had better give the necessary orders to the servants."

"I doubt whether Colonel Medhurst will ever come here again," answered Muriel; "I am sure he won't if Sir Harry Brewster is to be admitted. Surely there can be no question as to which of them ought to have the door shut against him."

An unwelcome idea was suggested to Mr. Wentworth by this speech. He had always taken the possibility of Muriel's marriage into account, but only in the same sense as he had contemplated the possibility of the house being burnt down or of his own premature demise. Just as there are a good many non-marrying men, so one occasionally comes across a non-marrying woman. He had mentally included his sister in the latter restricted class, and it is needless to add that he had done so very willingly. She was free to marry if she pleased, only her marriage would mean the curtailment of a considerable proportion of his personal comforts; and that may have been one reason why he at once jumped to the conclusion that Colonel Medhurst was in no way worthy of her.

"I am not prepared to shut my door against anybody," he rejoined rather sharply; "but supposing, for the sake of argument, that I had to be so uncivil, I would rather turn my back upon Medhurst, who is simply a heavy nonentity, than upon Sir Harry Brewster, who is a man of the world and a pleasant companion."

Muriel declined to take up the cudgels on Colonel Medhurst's behalf. "I daresay you would," she replied: "but why will you persist in shutting your eyes to the fact that you are not the only person in the house? It isn't for your sake or for Colonel Medhurst's, but for Sylvia's that I want you to put a stop to this intimacy with Sir Harry Brewster."

Mr. Wentworth laughed. "One of the funniest things about women," he remarked, "is the obstinacy with which they cling to an idea when there is not a tittle of evidence to support it. I have had more opportunities of seeing Sylvia and Sir Harry together than you have, and if you will believe me—but of course you won't—neither of them is dreaming of a project which is palpably inadmissible. I grant you that Sir Harry treated his wife abominably; but, as she was not a relation of mine, I don't feel called upon to avenge her wrongs. Colonel Medhurst naturally does. Very well; let him avenge them in any way that may recommend itself to him. If cutting our acquaintance is one of them, I shall submit uncomplainingly."

"You don't think it worth while to shield Sylvia from the risk of a great misfortune then?"

"My dear Muriel, haven't I just told you that the risk has no existence, except in your imagination? If you will only leave Sylvia alone and give her time, she will probably end by marrying Johnny Hill. She won't marry Sir Harry Brewster for two good reasons. Firstly, he won't ask her, and secondly, I shouldn't allow her to accept him if he did—Colonel Medhurst and he must settle their differences between them; only as I said before, I should take measures, if I were you, to prevent a settlement from occurring in this house. Our obvious course is to remain neutral."

Muriel sighed and left the room. She could do nothing with this selfish optimist; but she inwardly registered a vow to the effect that if Sir Harry Brewster had the effrontery to call again, he should find neither her nor Sylvia at home.

CHAPTER XI.

It is not with impunity that a sober, middle-aged man can permit his passions to gain the mastery over him. In the inevitable reaction which ensues, his self-esteem is sure to sink to a very low ebb, and he not only feels that he has behaved like a fool, but is apt to conclude that he has been inexcusable in so behaving. So, in spite of the unbending attitude which Colonel Medhurst had assumed on taking leave of Miss Wentworth, he had not proceeded far on his homeward way before the voice of his conscience began to make itself heard. Nothing—so he said to himself—can justify a fracas in the presence of ladies, and if an actual fracas had been averted, the credit was due to Sir Harry Brewster, not to him. For two pins he would have caught the man by the throat or knocked him down. He shuddered as he inwardly made that acknowledgment, and told himself that he was no better than a vulgar ruffian. Of course what he ought to have done, on hearing who the stranger was, was simply to go away. At the most he might perhaps have explained his reasons for doing so in a few words.

But it was too late to think of that now. What he had done could not be undone, and he must accept the consequences. One of these certainly seemed to be that a coldness would arise between him and the woman whom he no longer disguised from himself that he loved, and another, he supposed, would be that he must make some appointment to meet Sir Harry Brewster. That the man deserved to be insulted did not alter the fact that he had insulted him; he could not very well refuse to take any further notice of one whom he had treated in that way.

At the same time he did not, now that his head was cooler, see what satisfaction either of them was likely

to obtain from a meeting. It was all very well to talk about thrashing Sir Harry; but such things, if they are to be done at all, must be done upon the spur of the moment, and pistol and rapier have fallen into disuse in this country. Under the circumstances, therefore, nothing could be exchanged between him and his enemy except abusive language, which was scarcely a fit method of fighting for men to adopt. More mature reflection, however, led him to believe that there was, after all, just a possibility of some good resulting from the proposed interview. Remembering what Muriel had told him about her uneasiness respecting her niece, it dawned upon him that the undesirable suitor of whom she had spoken could be no other than Sir Harry Brewster, and he immediately made up his mind that he would at least relieve her of that source of anxiety. That it was in his power to do this he felt little doubt. It was not in his power to do anything for his sister: if he killed Sir Harry she would be none the better off, nor would she thank him. Her injuries were irremediable; but surely, knowing what he did, he could bring pressure enough to bear upon this scoundrel to preserve an innocent girl from sharing her fate. He had the simplicity to imagine that a threat of exposure would suffice; for, although nothing was more probable than that the man would tell Miss Wentworth a tissue of lies, these could easily be proved to be lies by the production of a file of old newspapers.

The outcome of his meditations was that, as soon as he had dined, he despatched the following telegram to the address given him by Sir Harry Brewster: "Shall I find you at home at eleven o'clock to-morrow?" Telegraphing had the double advantage of insuring a speedy answer and obviating all necessity for conventional forms of epistolary politeness. Sir Harry's reply was not long in reaching him.

"Glad to see you at the hour named."

"I wish I could make you sorry to see me, you villain!" muttered the Colonel, grinding his teeth, as he tossed the slip of paper into the fire. "Ah, if only you and I had lived a hundred years ago!"

But one must needs conform to the usages of the period to which one belongs, and an Englishman in the latter part of the nineteenth century has no means of healing his wounded honor save such as a court of law may be pleased to accord to him. Colonel Medhurst, therefore, presented himself at Queen Anne's Mansions, on the following morning, like any ordinary visitor, and was admitted as soon as the hall-porter had ascertained that Sir Harry Brewster was out of bed.

It was in Queen Anne's Mansions that Sir Harry Brewster resided at this time, his family mansion in Grosvenor square having been let for a term of years owing to unavoidable circumstances. The suite of apartments which he occupied formed very comfortable bachelor's quarters, nor would any one have supposed on seeing them that their owner was suffering from financial straits. Their owner, clad in a crimson plush smoking-suit, had finished his breakfast and was enjoying a cigarette and the perusal of *The Sportsman*, when the grim Colonel was announced. He at once got up.

"I really don't know whether it is any use to ask you to sit down," he said; "but pray do so if you feel inclined. In fact, you may consider me entirely at your orders. I am ready to give you a cigar or to clear away the furniture and engage in a stand-up fight—just as you please."

"I came here," answered Medhurst, speaking in the sharp, *staccato* accents of a man who has some difficulty in controlling himself, "because, after what I said to you at Miss Wentworth's house yesterday, it seemed to me that I was bound to accept your invitation to meet you alone. It is for you to decide whether there shall be a stand-up fight or not. For my own part, I don't propose to break your bones, because I don't see what would be the good of it."

Sir Harry smiled. "You are a heavier man than I, Colonel Medhurst," he remarked; "but, lest you should think that I am afraid of you, I may mention that I know how to use my fists about as well as any man in England. I doubt whether you would get a chance of breaking any of my bones in two hours. Besides which, I

agree with you that there would be no particular good in it if you did. Well, what can I do for you? You consider that I treated your sister badly, and I do not deny it. Would you like me to cross the Channel and fight a duel with you? If so, I'm quite willing to oblige you."

"No," answered the other gloomily; "I don't see that there would be any good in that either. And why should I let you have a shot at me? I meant what I told you yesterday; you are not a gentleman and you have no title to be treated as one."

"From the reason which you gave just now for your visit," returned Sir Harry, without losing his temper, "I supposed that you wished to give me an opportunity of avenging an insult. If you didn't, and if you won't fight, may I venture to ask why you are here?"

The question was certainly excusable; but Medhurst, who had not expected it to be put quite so soon, was not prepared to answer it forthwith. He gnawed his mustache for a moment and then remarked:

"You don't deny having treated my sister badly; but, in my opinion, 'badly' is scarcely a strong enough word to use. As much as that might have been said if you had at least kept your hands off her; but to beat a defenceless woman is—well it is simply to put yourself outside the pale of common humanity."

"On my side," replied Sir Harry, "I may say that 'beating' is too strong a word to use. I will tell you exactly what happened. Your sister is a pious woman, and like many other pious women she has the gift of exasperating sinners beyond all bearing. She so exasperated me by accusing me of misconduct in the presence of the servants that one evening I took her by the shoulders and pushed her out of the dining-room. On another occasion when her maid was in the room, she came close up to me and poured out a torrent of abuse against a woman of whom she was jealous, and whom she mentioned by name. I was angry with her for mentioning names; I threw up my hand rather with the intention of waving her back than of touching her, and I certainly did hit her on the arm. The maid afterwards swore that I had boxed

her ears—which was a lie. Mind you, I admit that I was violent and I admit that my wife had reason to be jealous; only I submit that when you speak of my having beaten her, you go too far."

"There is the evidence of eye-witnesses, which was not refuted and which was believed by the jury," returned Medhurst doggedly; "I am not bound to accept your version of what occurred. I don't care to discuss the matter; it is past mending. But one thing I wish to say to you: you must cease your visits to Miss Wentworth's house. It has come to my knowledge that you are paying attention to her niece—a girl who is scarcely more than a child—and you can't suppose that I shall allow that to go on. Even you ought to feel that such attentions on your part are a little too infamous."

"I have been very forbearing with you, Colonel Medhurst," answered Sir Harry; "I have tried to make every allowance for the indignation which you express and which I should express quite as forcibly, I daresay, if I were in your place. But I must point out to you that you are now putting forward claims which are wholly inadmissible. Naturally, I am not going to tell you whether you are mistaken or not in imagining that I am paying attentions to Miss Sylvia Wentworth; but, if I were, I could not recognize any right on your part to interfere with me. We will drop that subject, if you please."

"Then I shall direct Mr. Wentworth's attention to the report of the proceedings instituted against you in the Divorce Court."

"Of course you are at liberty to do so; although I presume that he is already acquainted with them. Possibly if I think fit to make the attempt, I may convince him that the evidence was not strictly in accordance with the facts."

"Possibly you may, if you are shameless enough; as perhaps you are. And yet it does seem to me that no human being with a spark of manliness left in him could be quite such a rascal. Surely it is no great thing to ask that you should refrain from bringing misery upon a girl who isn't old enough to understand what a history like yours means! You have escaped scot-free; nobody has pun-

ished you for what you have done; as I have told you, I myself don't intend to punish you——"

"Oh, excuse me," interrupted Sir Harry; "you really must not expect me to thank you for sparing me. I have offered to give you any kind of satisfaction that you like to ask for; if you won't take advantage of my offer the fault is not mine. Upon no conceivable ground are you entitled to dictate to me who my friends shall be."

There was disputing that assertion, and Colonel Medhurst, after a moment of meditation, realized that he could not dispute it. "Very well," he said; "you will take your course and I shall take mine. I don't think so badly of Mr. Wentworth as to believe that he will let you into his house when he has heard what I shall tell him about you."

With that he turned on his heel, and left his antagonist, feeling that he had by no means had the best of the encounter.

And now it seemed to him to be nothing less than his simple duty to call in Upper Brook Street and make a more ample apology to Miss Wentworth for his treatment of her visitor than he had made at the time. He had been in the right so far as Sir Harry Brewster was concerned, but he had certainly been in the wrong in creating an embarrassing situation for a lady, and he felt that he ought to say so. Perhaps he may also have been influenced by a strong desire to make his peace with the lady in question; but if so, he was honestly unconscious of it. Towards five o'clock, therefore, he wended his way westwards, animated by sentiments of the most penitent humility.

Now, it so chanced that at the same hour Muriel was returning home from her daily visit to the children's hospital, and thus it was that she was overtaken within a few yards of her own door by a gentleman whose aspect was very much less warlike than it had been on the occasion of their last meeting.

Medhurst offered his excuses a little awkwardly, yet after a fashion which was neither unflattering nor displeasing to their recipient. She understood very well that he could not bring himself to express regret for hav-

ing used plain language to a scoundrel, but that he was mortally afraid lest, by so doing, he should have lost the good opinion of one whose friendship he valued, and she hastened to assure him that there was no ground for that apprehension.

"You could not have acted in any other way," she declared; "you only said what it was impossible to help saying, and I quite agree with you that Sir Harry Brewster ought not to be allowed to enter our house. But what can I do? It is not my house, and my brother laughs at the idea of my setting myself up as a judge of the morality of his acquaintances."

"It isn't as an acquaintance of your brother's that you object to Sir Harry Brewster," remarked Medhurst, unwittingly taking up a somewhat more peremptory tone than he would have adopted, had he been reproached for his indiscretion. "I won't pretend to be ignorant of what is so obvious, and it is difficult to me to believe that Mr. Wentworth can be ignorant of it either."

"He can always manage to shut his eyes to things which he doesn't wish to see," sighed Muriel. "I have told him what I am afraid of; but he treats it as a mare's nest. He doesn't want to cut Sir Harry Brewster, who amuses him, and he refuses to believe that there can be any danger in the case of a man who is almost as old as he himself is."

"But even admitting that there is no danger, he must see that his daughter ought not to be upon intimate terms with a man of that character. I think, if you don't mind, I will have a little talk with him upon the subject."

"Of course I don't mind," answered Muriel, "but I am afraid he will only laugh at you. I have told the servants I shall not be at home to Sir Harry Brewster in future. That much I was entitled to do; but I can't prevent Sylvia from meeting him elsewhere. Fortunately she will be going down to the country in a few days, and I have written to beg Harriet Morecambe to keep her as long as possible. I don't think Sir Harry is serious; it is about her that I am frightened."

In speaking with so much frankness Muriel was giving Colonel Medhurst a proof of friendship which he appreciated and which gladdened his heart.

"We ought to be able to protect your niece between us, Miss Wentworth," said he, confidently. "Brazen it out as he may, that rascal must be ashamed of himself and must know that he hasn't a leg to stand upon. Anyhow, I'm glad to think that he won't be received by you any more. Probably Mr. Wentworth has forgotten some incidents of which I shall take the liberty to remind him."

Muriel, who by this time was standing on the doorstep, smiled and looked doubtfully at him. "You won't be angry if you are politely requested to mind your own business, will you?" she asked.

"Not I! I consider it my business to be of use to you in any way that I can—and I don't lose my temper very easily, Miss Wentworth, though I did forget myself in your presence yesterday."

Muriel smiled again and held out her hand. "I won't ask you to come in this evening," said she, "because I think perhaps you had better not meet Sylvia; but if you care to call in a few days you can do so without any fear of finding Sir Harry Brewster in the drawing-room."

So the day ended for Colonel Medhurst a good deal better than it had begun. With what weapons he was to defeat the machinations of Sir Harry Brewster he hardly knew; but one thing was, happily, beyond doubt, namely that he had entered into an alliance with Muriel Wentworth.

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CHAPTER XII.

"Oh, by the way, Harriet," said Lord Morecambe, bustling into his wife's boudoir with a great show of haste, "I have just had a telegram which concerns you rather more than me. I suppose the house isn't quite chock full, is it?"

Lady Morecambe pushed her chair back from the table at which she was writing letters and looked sharply at the speaker, whose eyes dropped somewhat guiltily under her gaze. She knew very well that when her husband pretended to be in a hurry it was because he was afraid of being scolded, and although in a general way she was the most good-natured and accommodating of wives, there were certain prerogatives of hers to which she clung tenaciously. One of these was the right to say who should and who should not be invited to Morecambe Priory—a very necessary privilege to insist upon, owing to the indiscriminate hospitality of her lord and master, who, had he been allowed to do as he pleased, would have asked all sorts of impossible people to stay with him upon the plea that they were what he called "good fellows."

"I can't say whether the house is full or not until I have seen the telegram," she replied; "give it to me."

But Lord Morecambe did not seem disposed to part at once with the slip of paper which he held in his hand. "Oh, it's only from Brewster," he said, in a deprecating tone of voice. "Wants to come down for the ball to-night. Rather cool, I admit, but that's just his way, you know. Of course you don't like him; but really he won't trouble you much this time. One more or less among such a crowd of people can't make any great difference, can it?"

A very angry woman was Lady Morecambe when the name of this self-invited guest was revealed to her.

"I never heard of such impudence in my life!" she exclaimed. "Most certainly the house is full—and if it was empty there would be no room in it for Sir Harry Brewster. You had better telegraph to him at once and say so. I could believe anything of the man's impertinence, but I do think he might have known better than to imagine that he could make a cat's paw of me in such an open way. And really it is too bad of Sylvia Wentworth. They must have arranged it between them. Muriel cannot have any suspicion, because she wrote to me a day or two ago, begging me to keep Sylvia here as long as possible and hinting that she wanted the girl to be removed from London on account of some flirtation or entanglement. It is easy enough to guess who the man must be. Well, he is very much mistaken if he thinks he can use this house as a place of assignation."

"Oh, come," expostulated Lord Morecambe; "I'm sure you can't mean to accuse a child like poor little Sylvia of doing such naughty things. As for Brewster, his flirtations have always been with married women, you know. Besides, he has turned over a new leaf of late, I'm told. I don't see what chance he can have had of making assignations with Sylvia Wentworth either. In all probability he hasn't set eyes on her since they met here."

"Unfortunately, that is just what he has; I have heard of it from more than one quarter during the last few days. Sir Harry was seen driving Sylvia and her father on a coach, and they were at the theatre together, too; and somewhere else—at Richmond, I think."

"O well, there you are!" said Lord Morecambe, with an air of relief. "If the girl's father allows Brewster to go about with her—and really I don't know why he shouldn't—it's none of our business to take precautions."

"I know very little of Mr. Wentworth," remarked Lady Morecambe; "he may be a perfect fool, and I daresay he is—nine men out of ten are. But you may depend upon it that he will have sense enough to abuse me if Sylvia gets into trouble, and I don't choose to lay

myself open to justifiable abuse. Sir Harry Brewster doesn't cross this threshold—that much I can promise you."

"But, my dear," said Lord Morecambe, timidly putting forward a consideration which he had hoped would have suggested itself to her ladyship, "how is the thing to be helped? You see, he must have started by this time, and it really isn't possible to turn a man away from one's door."

Lady Morecambe replied resolutely that this was not only possible but that it should be done. It was not her fault if every bedroom in the house was occupied, nor was she bound to prove that such was the case. "We don't keep an inn," she said.

"No; but Judkins at the Morecambe Arms does," remarked her husband. "Of course Brewster will go there and of course he will turn up at the ball to-night. We can't refuse to admit him without having a regular row—which would be deuced unpleasant for everybody."

Lady Morecambe was constrained to admit that a regular row was certainly undesirable, and, after a few minutes of meditation, she decided that house-room had better be given to Sir Harry Brewster for the night. "He shall leave by the first train to-morrow morning. though," she declared; "if you don't tell him that, I will. And you may give him to understand at the same time that he will never be asked here again, in the shooting season or out of it. Of all the wicked things that he has done, it does seem to me that this is the worst and the most selfish. Women who have been out in the world for half a dozen years can take care of themselves; but no man who was not an absolute wretch would try to break a schoolgirl's heart for the sake of securing a few hours of amusement."

Lady Morecambe was perhaps justified in accusing Sir Harry of abnormal selfishness, for he was in truth as selfish a man as ever lived; yet it so happened that in this particular instance he did not deserve the censure passed upon him. He had not attempted to amuse himself with Sylvia Wentworth; he had not flirted with

her; but, by one of those odd strokes of fate against which age and wisdom afford no protection, he had fallen desperately in love with the girl. At the outset, as has been said, he had thought of her probable fortune as an acquisition which might be worth making a bid for, but of late he had put all such mercenary considerations away from him. He would have been willing to marry her if she had not had a penny, nor the prospect of one, and his only dread was that her family would never consent to her union with a divorced man. After the little scenes which had taken place between him and Colonel Medhurst, it was of course his first duty to make out some sort of a case for himself with Mr. Wentworth, and he had hesitated for some time before despatching the telegram which had so greatly incensed Lady Morecambe. Eventually, however, he had made up his mind to be present at the ball. For one thing, he had promised Sylvia that he would be there, and, for another, he persuaded himself that he owed an explanation to her rather then to anybody else. He was fully aware that he would not be made welcome by Lady Morecambe; but that did disturb him in the least. He took care to preclude the possibility of her shutting her door in his face, and as he did not propose to remain more then one night under her roof, he was able to contemplate the prospect of a cold reception with philosophic indifference.

Sylvia, meanwhile, was exercised by grave doubts as to whether Sir Harry would put in an appearance or not. She had expected to hear, directly or indirectly, of him before she left London; but since he had made no sign, she was not free from anxiety lest the redoubtable Colonel Medhurst should have scared him away. She did not realize what that anxiety meant; she was not conscious of being ready to forgive him for any iniquity that he might have perpetrated in the past; all she knew was that if he deserted her, her life would once more become as dull and empty as it had been in the old days which already seemed so far away, and against that outlook she rebelled with all the passionate petulance of a spoilt child. But in the course of the afternoon her fears were dissipated, for she knew that Sir Harry

was coming. Lady Morecambe, who had hitherto been amiability itself, looked so annoyed and spoke so snappishly to her that she could form a pretty shrewd guess at what had occurred, and it was without any surprise that she heard herself addressed, just before dinner, in a voice which had become both familiar and sweet to her ears.

"May I be allowed to book two consecutive dances?" asked Sir Harry, hurriedly. "As you may imagine, I want to speak to you, and it is not likely that I shall be granted an opportunity before the dancing has begun."

"I will give you four and five," answered Sylvia, who had already possessed herself of a programme. "Are we to sit them both out? If so, perhaps you would like to have another one later on."

"I must leave that to your generosity; I don't know whether you will be inclined to dance with me later on. I suppose it will depend upon whether you are satisfied or not with what I have to say to you."

This was all that passed between them; for now Lady Morecambe abruptly put a stop to their colloquy by leading Sylvia away to the other end of the room. But nobody knew better than Lady Morecambe that it is impossible in a ball-room to separate two people who are bent upon coming together. She did what she could; she kept Sylvia beside her until the guests began to arrive; she introduced more young men to her *protégée* than there were dances on the programme, but she could not erase Sir Harry Brewster's name from the card which was attached to Miss Sylvia's fan, nor did her duties as a hostess permit her to quit her post in the doorway.

And so it came to pass that when the band struck up the opening bars of the fourth dance, Sylvia, on Sir Harry Brewster's arm, was being conducted out of the ball-room into an adjacent conservatory, where comfortable seats and subdued light and privacy were obtainable by those in search of such advantages.

"I am going to tell you nothing but the truth," he began, plunging at once and without preface into the midst of the subject of which they were both thinking. "If I don't tell you the whole truth, you will understand that it is because some things can't be put into plain

words. That man Medhurst had a right to call me all the bad names in the dictionary; his sister had a right to divorce me, and all I have to say for myself is that I was never guilty of physical violence against her, except in a technical sense. She was one of those good women who make everybody about her miserable. She made me miserable, and I have no doubt that I made her miserable. The fact is that I hated her. Perhaps I might be able to show that there were some excuses for me, though I don't pretend that they were sufficient excuses; but, before I attempt to do that, I should like to ask you whether, after what I have admitted, you can possibly continue to treat me as a friend."

Sylvia made the answer which his knowledge of her character may have led him to expect. "I don't make it a condition that my friends should be saints," she said; "as a rule I don't like saints. I think I can understand that there were excuses for you; but really I would rather hear no more about it. It is all over and done with, and—and I daresay you are sorry. Only I wish that your—your enemy were anybody but Colonel Medhurst!"

"You are very kind, and very generous," answered Sir Harry; "but why do you say that? Is Colonel Medhurst a more formidable enemy than any other man could be?"

"Yes; because Muriel believes in him, and, although she isn't exactly mistress of the house, she can close it against visitors whom she doesn't choose to see. She has given orders that you are not to be let in again; I know that from my maid, who was told by the butler."

"If it had depended upon you, then, that order wouldn't have been given?"

"No; it wouldn't. What have I to do with Colonel Medhurst and his grievances? And why should I deprive myself of one of the very few friends I have in the world?"

Sir Harry's rejoinder was somewhat startling, and in truth he himself had not contemplated coming to the point quite so soon; but such success as he had had in life had been chiefly due to audacity, and he had acquired an instinctive knack of striking while the iron was hot.

"Shall I tell you something?" said he. "Circumstances will never admit of my being your friend. I must be more than that or nothing at all."

And as she drew back with a half-frightened look and made no answer, he went on: "I know it is ridiculous for a man of my age to flatter himself that he can obtain what he might have hoped for twenty years ago, and even if I were younger, I should be heavily handicapped by the events that you have been told of. Nevertheless, I can but say that I love you with all my heart and soul. Now give me the *coup de grâce* quickly and put me out of my misery."

Sylvia was taken by surprise; yet if ample time for deliberation had been accorded to her, her reply would no doubt, have been the same. She had not until that moment been aware that she loved Sir Harry Brewster; but she was aware of it now, and that being so, it was neither his age nor his history that could deter her from answering:

"I can't send you away; I—I care too much for you. There will be a terrible fuss about it; but—I don't mind, if you don't."

What followed was what presumably always does follow a declaration of that nature. Lady Morecambe, released by the lateness of the hour from the task of shaking hands with a multitude of people whose names she could not recollect, and noticing with alarm that neither Sir Harry Brewster nor Sylvia Wentworth were in the ball-room, reached the conservatory just in time to discover the former in the very act of embracing the latter. Wrath and dismay rendered her speechless for an instant; but only for an instant.

"Sir Harry," she exclaimed, advancing with rapid steps upon the delinquents, "you are worse than wicked! I will never forgive you for this—never. If you have an atom of honorable feeling left, you will at least keep silence about what has happened; but I am afraid your honor would be a broken reed to lean upon. You will be so good as to leave us now, and to go away by the first train to-morrow morning."

"I will go away to-night if you like, Lady Morecambe,"

answered Sir Harry, composedly. "All the same, I don't quite understand what you are so angry about."

"You don't understand!" returned the irate lady; "you don't understand that you have committed an abominable outrage. But of course you do understand, and I have nothing more to say to you. Please leave Miss Wentworth to me."

Sir Harry bowed, smiled slightly and retired, throwing a reassuring glance back at Sylvia, who thereupon observed:

"I think it is you who do not understand, Lady Morecambe. Sir Harry Brewster and I are engaged to be married."

"Oh, you foolish child! Don't you know that the man has a wife living?"

"I know that he once had a wife, and that he is divorced from her."

"Good Heavens! what is the world coming to? In my young days some people used to call me fast; but I am sure I never could have spoken of divorce in that cool way. You must have taken leave of your senses, Sylvia. Well, I am not responsible; I neither asked nor wished Sir Harry to come here, and I wash my hands of the whole business. To-morrow I shall send you home to your father, who, I hope and trust, will have the decency not to blame me for a catastrophe which I have had no share in bringing about."

"I will take the whole blame upon myself, Lady Morecambe," answered Sylvia, submissively but firmly. "I know I shall have a bad time of it, and I don't care. Papa may forbid me to marry Sir Harry Brewster now; but I shall marry him as soon as I am of age."

Lady Morecambe was somewhat staggered. She had not been prepared for the girl's quiet determination, which she was unable to shake by a brief but vivid sketch of Sir Harry's career. The fact was that Sylvia had all her life been accustomed to impose her will upon those about her, and it was not likely that her self-confidence should desert her in so important a crisis as this. She was happy and she was triumphant; in her heart she was persuaded that Sir Harry had never loved anyone but

her, and if she thought at all of the woman who had been his wife, it was only with a sort of contemptuous pity.

Before the evening was over she contrived to exchange a few more words with him. She was returning home on the following day, she said, and she would of course communicate the news of her engagement at once to her people. Perhaps he had better not call until he heard from her.

"I will do just what you tell me," Sir Harry replied. "We must make up our minds to a good deal of opposition, you know."

"Oh yes; there will be opposition at first. But they will give in after a time—they must. Even if they succeed in separating us for years—but there is very little fear of their doing that—I shall not change. Will you?"

He said what everybody else would have said in his place, and said it with as much sincerity as anybody else could have felt. Like Lady Morecambe, he was astonished at Sylvia's calm decision of purpose and, unlike her, he was touched by it. If it were true that a reformed rake makes the best husband, there would perhaps have been no great reason to pity that self-willed and inexperienced young woman; but in all probability it is not true. At any rate, a man of Sir Harry Brewster's age is not much more likely to make a fresh start than habitual criminals are to earn an honest livelihood, and it may have been some dim perception of this fact that caused him to sigh in the moment of victory.

CHAPTER XIII.

MAN is born to labor and sorrow, but is so constituted that the first of these conditions of his existence is more often a palliative than a cause of the second. To be perfectly idle and at the same time to be able to enjoy life is to be a very exceptional specimen of humanity; yet some such there are, and it was Mr. Wentworth's good or evil fortune to be one of them. He not only never did a stroke of work, but was singularly devoid of those resources by means of which moneyed men commonly seek to persuade themselves that they are busy. He read a little, but not very much; he knew a little about art and a little about music and a little about old oak and old silver; he was fond of attending sales, and he liked dining with his friends and asking them to dine with him. By far the larger portion of his time was spent at his club, where he would sit contentedly for hours together, chatting with this or that fellow member, and covertly amusing himself by drawing out the weaknesses and idiosyncrasies of his companion.

But it was little amusement that he could get out of Lieutenant-Colonel Medhurst C.B., who called upon him one afternoon at that establishment and gave reasons for having done so with military brevity and precision. It was perhaps rather funny that Colonel Medhurst should attach the importance that he did to those reasons; still the man was almost too earnest to be laughed at; besides, he was, in a certain sense, right. One could scarcely contradict him, although one might think him impertinent, when he asserted that Sir Harry Brewster was no fit associate for two young ladies. Mr. Wentworth, having heard the Colonel out, answered him with perfect courtesy and with only so much of irony as he really could not help.

"I quite agree with you, my dear Medhurst," said he,

"that Sir Harry is a very bad man. It may very well be that he deserves to be kicked downstairs, and I'm sure I don't wonder at your thinking so. Only, you see, if I were to begin kicking all the bad men of my acquaintance downstairs, I should be undertaking a task to which my physical powers are quite unequal. In this wicked world we are compelled to forgive and forget many things; especially we are compelled to close our eyes to offences which have not been committed against ourselves or members of our family."

"It is an offence against members of your family that that man should be allowed to make his way into your house," interrupted Colonel Medhurst. "You may have forgotten some of the facts which were brought to light during the divorce case, and I have brought a full report of the proceedings in my pocket to remind you of them."

"Thanks; but I won't trouble you. It would be painful for you to dwell upon such a subject, and I think my memory serves me pretty well. It was a very bad case—as bad as you please—still I can but feel, as the rest of the world has felt, that I am not personally concerned with it. The rest of the world hasn't thought it necessary to cut Sir Harry Brewster; nor do I."

"I should have thought that every decent man and woman in England would have cut him," growled the Colonel.

"Yes; but isn't that due to the circumstance that you are personally concerned with the case? That you should object to entering a house in which Sir Harry Brewster is received is quite natural, and if you tell me that you decline to enter my house again I must bow to your decision, deeply though I should regret it. But may I make so bold as to point out to you that ordering me to turn another man away from my door is rather a different thing? I wouldn't for the world ask you to meet Brewster, and I am very sorry that you should have met him under my roof; but I am afraid I can do no more than promise that I will take every reasonable precaution against your meeting him there a second time."

Obviously Colonel Medhurst could demand nothing more. It was open to him to say that, under the circum-

stances, he must cease to be a visitor in Upper Brook Street; but that was just what he felt unable to say, and it was not for him to place restrictions upon Mr. Wentworth's visiting-list. He did go so far as to express some surprise that a notorious scoundrel should be admitted into respectable society; but all he gained by that was a bland assurance that respectable society contained quite an appreciable percentage of notorious scoundrels. The impression that he carried away with him was that respectable society stood in urgent need of reform and that he individually did not possess the gifts requisite for a social reformer.

Mr. Wentworth, for his part, was slightly annoyed and perturbed by this interview. For reasons of his own, he would not have been greatly distressed by an intimation that Colonel Medhurst proposed to decline the honor of his future acquaintance; but no such intimation had been conveyed to him. He had merely been given to understand what was probably the case, that he was lending his countenance to an intimacy which most parents would have nipped in the bud. For he knew very well that a good many people did cut Sir Harry Brewster, although a good many continued to receive him. He was wondering vaguely whether it might not, after all, be as well to civilly dismiss a friend whose friendship seemed likely to be productive of more trouble than it was worth, when a card was brought to him, together with a message that a gentleman who would be glad to see him for a few minutes if he was disengaged, was waiting in the hall.

Mr. Wentworth raised his eyebrows on examining the the card, which bore the name of Mr. John Hill. "What the deuce does that young idiot want with me?" he muttered. "Has he come to make a formal announcement of the sentiments with which he has been inspired by my daughter?"

Such was, in point of fact, Johnny Hill's errand, and deep was the confusion with which he discharged himself of it. When he had been conducted into a quiet corner of the smoking-room and had been given a cigar, which he at once allowed to go out, he embarked upon a

rambling statement of which the only intelligible upshot was that he wished to apologize for his intrusion. He had not been able to think of any other way of securing Mr. Wentworth's undivided attention, he explained.

"Delighted to see you anywhere or at any time, my dear fellow," that gentleman replied reassuringly. "You wanted to speak to me about something or other?"

Johnny, with red cheeks and watery eyes, blurted out the truth. The terms in which he expressed himself were somewhat incoherent; but he managed to make his meaning clear. He loved Sylvia, and he wished to know whether he had her father's permission to propose to her.

Mr. Wentworth could not help laughing. "You are very punctilious," he remarked. "I thought that in these days it was customary to propose first and then face the possibly indignant head of the family. You will be glad to hear that I am not indignant—far from it. To the best of my belief, you possess sufficient means, and an irreproachable character; what more could I desire? It only remains for you to obtain Sylvia's consent."

"Ah—that's just the difficulty," observed Johnny, ruefully.

"I'm afraid I can't help you out of it. That is, unless a few words of sage counsel would be of any assistance. I wouldn't be in too great a hurry, if I were you. I should trust to time, which seldom fails to show young women how great is the value of the—er—peculiar advantages that you possess. For the present you would do well to remember that Sylvia is only just out of the schoolroom, that girls, like boys, have a natural curiosity to see something of the world before settling down, and that she has as yet met scarcely any men at all."

"It strikes me that she has met one too many," said Johnny, with a gloomy emphasis which rather astonished his mentor. "Of course she can't know what a brute that fellow Brewster is; but she has found out that he can make himself most confoundedly agreeable when he likes."

For once Mr. Wentworth's equable temper almost gave way. After submitting to the officious remonstrances of Colonel Medhurst, was he going to be lectured by this raw hobbledehoy?

"My good friend," said he, "in your condition it is usual and excusable to be jealous; but it is neither the one nor the other to be idiotic. Do you really imagine that I should allow my daughter to marry a man who is ruined and divorced, and who is more than twice her age into the bargain?"

"No, I don't," answered Johnny, bluntly; "but I imagine that, if you allow him to follow her about wherever she goes, you may not be able to prevent her from falling in love with him."

Johnny Hill might be a hobbledehoy, and his apprehensions might be idiotic, but it was impossible to deny that this last observation of his sounded very like common sense. Mr. Wentworth was so far impressed by it that he rejoined in a much less contemptuous tone: "He does not follow her about wherever she goes. At the present moment, for instance, she is staying down in the country with Lady Morecambe, and is likely to remain there for some little time, I believe."

"It was at Lady Morecambe's that she first met Sir Harry Brewster," remarked the suspicious Johnny.

"I am aware of that; but he does not reside permanently with Lady Morecambe. However, if it will make you any happier to know that we shall probably see less of Sir Harry in future than we have done lately, I can give you that comfort. My sister doesn't like him, and when a man has the misfortune to be disliked by the *de facto* mistress of a house"—Mr. Wentworth shrugged his shoulders expressively.

The truth was that he was beginning to be just a little bit alarmed. Improbable events do sometimes occur, and it is never worth while to run unnecessary risks, and Sir Harry threatened to become a nuisance. As he strolled homewards, after getting rid of Johnny Hill, who went away much reassured, he said to himself that he would give Brewster a hint. That, after all, could be easily and inoffensively done. Brewster, as a man of the world, would understand that any repetition of the scene which had taken place between him and Medhurst must be guarded against; there would be no occasion to discuss the merits of the quarrel or to blame either party to it.

Having arrived at this decision, Mr. Wentworth had leisure to turn his mind to other subjects, and to laugh softly over the memory of Johnny's mingled embarrassment and audacity. "I suppose the poor boy really came to lodge a formal objection against Brewster," he mused; "he can't have thought it incumbent upon him to ask my consent before offering that big, red hand of his to Sylvia. Who put him up to it, I wonder? Not his mother; she is too delightfully stupid to believe that her ugly duckling could be cut out by any swan. Sylvia is sure to refuse him; but then he is sure to propose again and again. Men of that type always do, and almost always end by getting what they want. Meanwhile it will be as good as a play to watch bim and his mamma during the progress of the wooing."

It was in his accustomed good spirits that Mr. Wentworth reached his house, and he was only a little put out to find Muriel waiting for him in his study. However, he thought it due to himself to greet her with a plaintive sigh.

"Everybody seems to have entered into a conspiracy to worry me to-day," he remarked. "I need not ask whether that is what you propose to do; your presence here is sufficient evidence of it. Added to which, I can read your fell intentions upon your face."

"James," said Muriel, "a dreadful thing has happened. Sylvia came home this afternoon."

"An unexpected occurrence," remarked Mr. Wentworth. "But scarcely to be called dreadful in itself. Afterwards?"

"She has come home because Harriet Morecambe wouldn't keep her any longer. It appears that that wretch Sir Harry Brewster invited himself down there and actually made an offer of marriage to Sylvia, who has accepted him."

Mr. Wentworth gave a low whistle. "This is serious," was his comment upon the news imparted to him.

"It is very serious indeed. I can't understand Sylvia; she seems to feel no shame at all about it, and she coolly declares she will marry the man with or without your consent."

"Oh, nonsense! she can't marry him without my consent. Nevertheless, it is deuced awkward, and I confess that I am amazed at Brewster's impudence. Muriel, my dear, if it would relieve your feelings to crow over me, you can do so. I acknowledge your right to crow."

"I don't want to crow over you, James; I didn't believe any more than you did that such a misfortune as this could happen. The question is what are we to do?"

"Well, there isn't room for much hesitation upon that point. I forbid the banns, and there's an end of it."

Muriel shook her head. "I doubt whether you will make an end of it quite so easily," said she. "You don't know how calm and resolute Sylvia is about it; I never knew her so resolute about anything before. She is quite aware that you won't give your consent; but she says she is willing to wait until she is of age."

"In that case you need not bring premature wrinkles upon yourself by drawing up the skin of your forehead as you are doing now. Before Sylvia is of age she will have seen many men more fascinating than Brewster, and long before that date he will have forgotten her. For the time being there will be trouble though, I suppose. It is an abominable nuisance, but I am afraid there is nothing for it but change of air. One would fain be permitted to finish the winter in one's own more or less comfortable house; still at the call of duty one must not be found wanting. I wonder whether it wouldn't open Johnny Hill's mind to join us somewhere in southern Europe in the course of the spring."

"Oh, Johnny Hill!" ejaculated Muriel, disdainfully.

"Why not? He is eligible, and Sir Harry is reputed to be fickle. Pique, my dear, has been the means of helping many an honest man over a stile before now. And Johnny, I may tell you, is very much in earnest. He interviewed me this afternoon for the purpose of stating his intentions explicitly. It will all come right in the end I think; the most disagreeable part of the business is that I shall have to be extremely rude to Brewster. It is true that he deserves it; but I detest being rude."

Muriel did not much like her brother's light way of

treating an affair which he himself had called serious; still it was a relief to find that he did not dream of sanctioning the engagement; for indeed she had not felt sure that he would express himself so decisively.

"I don't think Sir Harry Brewster can give you much trouble," said she; "you need not even see him, unless you like. But you will have to see Sylvia."

"Well, yes; that is unavoidable, no doubt. Perhaps, however, I may be allowed to eat my dinner before going through the painful duty of pronouncing sentence. It is humiliating that one's equanimity should depend so much upon the condition of one's stomach; but we are mortals, not angels, and we must accept the disadvantages of our position. What consoles me is that Sylvia, being as much of a human being as I am, will outlive the sorrows and follies that belong to early youth. It doesn't, as a rule, take very long to outlive them."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE reason why parents so frequently lose all control over their children is doubtless to be found in the inefficiency of their memories. They forget—most of us, unfortunately, do—how they themselves felt when they were young; they forget that a very few years suffice to convert a child into a man or a woman; they are unable to realize that after a certain time it is not enough to hold the reins, and that those who wish to retain authority must know how to drive. Mr. Wentworth, being convinced, as he had every right and reason to be, that a marriage between his daughter and Sir Harry Brewster was a preposterous project, anticipated no great difficulty in placing his veto upon it. Tears, of course, he did anticipate, and there would be the nuisance and expense of going abroad for a few months; but that this trouble would prove anything more than a transitory one he did not for a moment imagine.

It was, therefore, without any misgivings as to his power to enforce his will upon his daughter, that he requested her to accompany him into his study after a dinner during which it had not been easy to keep up appearances before the servants and to maintain the customary flow of conversation. He had made up his mind to be very patient and forbearing; he was prepared to find Sylvia unreasonable, and he knew that he would not enjoy his first cigar; but he had the magnanimity to acknowledge that he had been in some degree to blame for what had occurred, and he was willing to submit to the disagreeable consequences of his own heedlessness.

"This is an unfortunate business, my dear child," he began, when he had settled himself in an armchair and had motioned to Sylvia to take one on the opposite side of the fireplace. "I need not tell you that it has distressed me very much; nor, I presume, is it necessary

for me to say that it cannot be allowed to go on. Brewster has behaved very badly, I think; but that is a question between him and me; so far as you are concerned, there is only one thing to be done, and that is to forget as soon as possible how foolish you have been. We shall do what we can to help you to forget your folly, and you may be sure that we shall not remind you of it."

"Is that all, papa?" inquired Sylvia, after waiting for a few seconds.

"Practically, my dear, that appears to me to be all," answered Mr. Wentworth, smiling.

"Then I suppose I may have my say. I didn't expect you to consent to our engagement; I know that Sir Harry Brewster is neither young nor rich, nor virtuous; I know that he has been divorced from his wife and that he is in every way an unsuitable person for me to marry. Only I shall never marry anybody else."

This declaration did not perturb Mr. Wentworth, who thought that, all things considered, it was decidedly moderate, both in substance and in tone. "You think so," said he; "that is what everybody thinks at first starting, and it is only after a good many years of experience that we realize our subjection to the universal and beneficent law of change. A day will come—it will not be a very distant day either—when you will get quite red in the face every time that you recollect having once fancied yourself in love with Sir Harry Brewster. You will then, I have no doubt, thank Heaven that you were not an orphan and your own mistress at the time when he had the impudence to propose to you. Meanwhile, the less said about him the better. I have been talking things over with Muriel, and my idea is that our best plan will be to leave England for a month or two. You have no idea what an old story this chapter in your life will seem to you when we return in the spring."

"You may make any plans that you like, papa," answered Sylvia, composedly, "and you can take me to any place that you please; but I shall not give up Sir Harry Brewster, and I don't think he will give me up."

Mr. Wentworth laughed. "You have faith in yourself and faith in human nature," he remarked. "That is

very pretty, and at your age it is very becoming. It can't hold out long against the hard facts of existence though. Well, I don't know that I have anything more to say. I couldn't say more without hurting your feelings, and I am sure I have no wish to do that."

"You wouldn't hurt my feelings by anything that you could say against Sir Harry, papa," answered Sylvia, as she dutifully kissed her father and wished him good-night; "I have heard it all from Lady Morecambe and other people, and I don't mind. It makes no difference."

The truth was that she understood that complacent philosopher a good deal better than he understood her, and was very well aware that he was incapable of persistent opposition.

If he congratulated himself upon the comparative smoothness with which their interview had passed off, so did she. He had seemed to gain his point; but in reality he had gained nothing except time, and that much it had been certain that he must gain. As a matter of fact, time was her ally and not her enemy.

Before she went to bed she wrote a letter to Sir Harry, wherein she gave a full account of the manner in which the news of her engagement had been received by those who excercised nominal authority over her.

"They did not scold me so much as I thought they would," she concluded, "and though their taking me abroad is a bore, it wasn't worth while to make a grievance out of that. Muriel is horrified; but I think I know how to manage Muriel. As for papa, he simply doesn't believe that anybody can care very much for anybody else. When he finds out that he is mistaken he will sigh and shrug his shoulders and let me go my own way. That is what he always ends by doing, because he likes a quiet life. Of course you will have to call upon him, if only to show him that you are not ashamed or afraid. The best time would be about eleven o'clock in the morning, when he has finished his breakfast and read the paper."

It is needless to quote further from a missive of which the wording was not quite so unimpassioned throughout as in the above extract. It was not Sylvia's way to do

things by halves, and, having given her whole heart to Sir Harry Brewster, she found it only natural to tell him without affectation of reticence how dearly she loved him.

The conscience of that elderly miscreant pricked him a little as he perused the girl's artless love-letter. To do him justice, fear was a sensation with which he had but scant acquaintance, and he was certainly not afraid of Mr. Wentworth; but as for not being ashamed—well, that was another affair. His remorse, no doubt, was somewhat tardy, and duty now commanded him to stand by Sylvia as imperatively as it had commanded him a short time ago to avoid her; still charitable persons may perhaps be disposed to count it as a sign of grace in him that he did feel remorseful. He told himself that he did not deserve her pure and unsuspecting affection; he likewise told himself that he would do what in him lay to deserve it for the future; and these unexceptionable sentiments made him, it must be confessed, a good deal more comfortable. For the present, his obvious course was to call in Upper Brook Street at eleven o'clock on the following morning, and this he did with strict punctuality.

Mr. Wentworth greeted him as a man whose confidence has been betrayed is justified in greeting his deceiver. More in sorrow than in anger, he dwelt upon the injury that had been done to him and to his daughter and regretted that one whom he had supposed to be his friend should have acted in such a manner as to render a continuance of friendly relations between them impossible. Sir Harry, he said, would probably understand that the question of a marriage or an engagement could not even be discussed; the amazing thing was that such a suggestion should ever have been put forward.

"One does not quarrel with the ignorance of a child in her teens; but I think you must allow, Brewster, that I should have some right to quarrel with you if I were a quarrelsome man."

"My dear Wentworth," answered Sir Harry, "you have a right to say anything and everything that is bad of me. I can't even expect you to believe me when I tell you that I love your daughter; it was inexcusable on my

part to tell her so, and I shall not attempt to excuse myself. But let me ask you, as a practical man—what, under the circumstances, is it that you would have me do?"

"Nothing, except to go away. I am sorry to be so discourteous; but you have left me no choice. For the matter of that, we also shall go away. I have decided to take Sylvia abroad for the rest of the winter."

"That is perhaps the best plan that you can adopt; but you will come home again, and if, as I firmly believe will be the case, she and I remain faithful to one another——"

"Really, Brewster," interrupted Mr. Wentworth in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "I think you might know better than to talk such nonsense as that to me."

"I assure you I am honestly persuaded that I am talking sense. I won't make protestations, because, as I said before, I can't expect you to believe me; but I suppose you will admit that so long as your daughter continues to be true to me I am bound to be true to her."

"I confess that I should not have imagined you to be an upholder of that particular form of moral obligation. However, it is of no great consequence; because, whatever Sylvia may be, you cannot be permitted to approach her. The episode, in short, is at an end. You will very likely never see my daughter again: but if by chance you should meet, I trust that it will be a long time hence."

"I don't dispute your authority," answered Sir Harry, "although I may doubt whether it is in the power of any human being to enforce such a decision. You will allow me, perhaps, to see Sylvia for a few minutes and say good-bye to her."

"Certainly not. Why should I allow it?"

"I know of no reason why you should, although I think you might make that concession without danger. I will write to her then, and she can show you my letter, if you wish to see it. I shall say nothing, or very little, more to her than I have said to you; but I think I owe it to her to explain that I have not been cowed into deserting her. My position, you understand, is this. I cannot

—especially in view of what my antecedents have been—persist in forcing my attentions against her father's wish, upon a girl who is still under age; bnt I am entitled to tell her that, if she continues in the same mind, she may count on my fidelity."

"I am not sure," answered Mr. Wentworth, with a smile, "that you are entitled to tell her anything; but probably your saying that will do no harm. After all, one must say something."

And indeed, it was in a very tolerant and self-satisfied frame of mind that this peremptory parent bowed his visitor out. His victory had been achieved with singularly little difficulty or unpleasantness, and he was beginning to think that a trip to the South of France might not be quite such a nuisance as he had represented it to be. He spent the remainder of the morning in consulting guide-books and railway time-tables, and became mildly interested in his studies. There were plenty of places, it seemed, which he had not visited and amongst which a few months might be spent agreeably enough. If the guide-books were to be trusted, creature comforts were obtainable at Pau, Biarritz, Nice, Cannes, and numerous other winter resorts of invalided Britons.

"It is all settled," he told Muriel later in the day. "Brewster retires—under protest, of course—still he retires; and Father Time will now step in and perform his customary work. We are well out of it at the price of an expensive journey and a more or less dreary sojourn in foreign hotels."

Muriel intimated—as possibly she may have been expected to do—that she was prepared to take the lion's share of the expense upon herself; but she was a good deal less sanguine than her brother as to results. Sylvia had always been wilful; but her wilfulness had hitherto been displayed after a very different fashion, and it was not a little disquieting to find that the girl had no complaint to make on being informed that Sir Harry Brewster had allowed himself to be turned out of the house without even insisting upon a farewell interview with her.

And when Sir Harry's promised letter arrived, Sylvia at once handed it to her aunt, merely remarking that it was the letter of a gentleman. It was a letter, Muriel thought, which had obviously been written with the knowledge that it would be inspected by others besides its recipient; but what was the use of saying that? Exception could not be taken to its terms, which were scrupulously correct. The writer disclaimed any idea or intention of fettering the girl whom he loved, and of whom he admitted himself to be utterly unworthy. He was bound, but she was free, and her freedom would never be interfered with, directly or indirectly, by him. He would only ask her to believe that his enforced absence and silence did not and never would imply any lessening of his love.

"It is quite hopeless and quite impossible, you know," Muriel said, as she handed this admirably worded document back to its rightful owner.

"Would you think so if you were in my place and if you loved him?" inquired Sylvia, quietly.

"Yes; I am sure I should. I might not be able to help loving him; but I should feel that it would be disgraceful to marry him while his wife was still alive."

"Well, I suppose I am not as good as you are; for I don't feel in that way about it at all. Lady Brewster, if that is what she calls herself, isn't his wife any longer, and he never cared for her, and he does care for me. That is all that I want to know. I don't mind his having been wicked; everybody is wicked in one way or another, and I daresay I am quite as bad as he is in reality, though I haven't had the chance of doing anything scandalous. I think I might become downright wicked if he were to abandon me to my fate; but he won't abandon me. He is willing to wait for me, and I am willing to wait any length of time for him."

Distressed though Muriel was by this speech (for of course nothing was more likely than that Sir Harry Brewster would abandon the girl who so blindly trusted him), she was, nevertheless, more drawn towards her niece by it than she had ever felt before. Sylvia, it seemed, was by no means the heartless and selfish flirt

that she had sometimes appeared to be, and although one might deplore her infatuation, it was impossible to help sympathizing with her.

"Oh, my poor child," she exclaimed almost involuntarily; "I wish I could help you! I wish it were possible to give you what you want."

"I know I can't have what I want at once," answered the girl; "but it is quite possible for you to help me, and I believe you will when you have got over the first shock of the thing. You are not like papa; you understand that I am in earnest."

Then the two women kissed each other, and there was a tacit agreement between them that the trouble which the younger had brought upon herself should at least be no longer made a subject of reproach by the elder. It will be perceived that Sylvia had indulged in no very extravagant boast when she had asserted that she knew how to manage her aunt.

Muriel, however, was not conscious of having taking any step towards countenancing an alliance which she still considered to be absolutely out of the question. What she did fully realize was that there was going to be a good deal more difficulty and a good deal more unhappiness over this affair than her brother imagined, and she foresaw that if she was to be of any service to Sylvia, she would have her work cut out for her for a considerable length of time to come. Meanwhile, what was to become of the other work that she had undertaken?—and what would Mr. Compton think of a residence in continental watering-places as qualifying her for ultimate admission into the Society of St. Francis?

Well, the shortest way was, no doubt, to ask him; and this she did on the earliest opportunity, though she could not refrain from answering for him before he had opened his lips.

"I know exactly what you are going to say," she declared; "you told me from the first that I had home duties to attend to, and that I had no business to neglect them. Well, I don't mean to neglect them, you see; I don't mean to leave Sylvia until she is—consoled; but if

you are at all fair, I think you will admit that I shall be sacrificing myself far more by consenting to a kind of life which I shall hate than I could be by working under you in London, which I should love."

"By what sort of hateful life do you propose to console your niece?" Compton inquired.

"Oh, by going as much as possible into society, I suppose, and by making as many new friends for her as we can. Don't you think that it is our best chance?"

"I am without the means of forming an opinion; but, from what you tell me about her, I should say that she might very probably beat you. If her will is stronger than yours, and if Sir Harry Brewster behaves himself, this is what will happen. Some fine morning you will say to yourself that you can't bear to see people miserable, that you have money enough to overcome financial objections, and that divorce, after all, is sanctioned by the law of the land. Then you will proceed to despoil yourself in favor of your niece, and you will come to me to ask whether you haven't given as convincing proofs of unworldliness as any rules of ours could demand."

"You are very cruel and very unjust!" returned Muriel, the color mounting into her cheeks. "You have no right to say that I shall act in that way, and one thing can promise you—if I ever ask you again to let me join your Society, I will not come to you empty-handed."

Mr. Compton smiled. "You will not find me cruel or unjust when you are empty-handed or in any real trouble," said he; "if I make cruel predictions now, it is only because I want to put you on your guard against verifying them. The danger is real, though you don't believe in it—we'll say no more upon the subject. The children will miss you terribly, and you may be sure that we shall all welcome you if you care to come back to us on your return home."

This was cold comfort; but it was all that poor Muriel could obtain from her hard-hearted clerical adviser, and she was fain to make the best of it.

CHAPTER XV.

Artists who have reached a certain age—painters or musicians or whatever they may be—will remember that, in the days when they were still students and were ignorant of the existence of that great gulf which separates mere promise from proficiency, they had to pass through a period of profound discouragement and disappointment. Of students some are diffident from the outset, while others, whose intelligence moves more quickly, make light of preliminary obstacles and outstrip their competitors by sheer force of self-confidence. Teachers, as a rule, prefer the latter class, because there is better work to be got out of them at starting, yet it may be doubted whether their lot is an enviable one. For sooner or later the inevitable time must come when they find out that they are only just beginning to face difficulties instead of being within sight of their goal, and the reaction which sets in after this discovery is fatal to not a few amongst them. Somewhat analogous is the lot of those who have fondly and prematurely imagined that they understood their own characters and knew exactly what they were worth. All of a sudden something occurs which opens their eyes; they see themselves as others see them; they realize that they are not in the least what they had supposed, that they do not possess the qualities upon which they had plumed themselves; and then, if they are in any degree sensitive or conscientious, they are very apt to jump to the conclusion that they are worth nothing at all.

Such, at any rate, was the melancholy conclusion at which Muriel Wentworth arrived when she reached home and pondered over the conversation of which a part was recorded in the last chapter. It was not that she believed in the fulfilment of Compton's prophecy;

he himself had as good as admitted that he was only warning her against a possible danger, though he had called it a real one. But what hurt her was the idea that she was a person about whom a prophecy of that kind could be made, and what caused her to despair was an inward conviction that the keen-witted little Superior of the Society of St. Francis had not wholly misjudged her. He had always refused to take her seriously, and it might very well be that he had been right. Perhaps she was not of the stuff of which his followers must needs be composed: when she examined herself she felt almost sure that she was not. She had too many misgivings; she was too much given to looking back after putting her hand to the plough; the world, in short, was a very complicated place of habitation, and it was no such simple matter to retire from it and all its complications. Of course she was determined that she would never under any circumstances be a consenting party to anything so monstrous as Sylvia's marriage with Sir Harry Brewster, yet something whispered to her that she was not altogether incapable of such criminal weakness, and so she lost faith in herself and in her strength of purpose. When all was said, what was she but a discontented woman who, for no better reason than that she was discontented, had fancied herself fitted to fill a more lofty position than the very commonplace and uninteresting one which had been assigned to her by Providence?

Self-knowledge is doubtless salutary; but self-distrust and self-disgust can do nobody any good; so that it was just as well for Muriel that she was interrupted in the midst of these gloomy meditations by the entrance of a visitor who had always recognized and rendered full justice to her virtues.

"I thought I might venture to look in upon you, since your niece is away from home," Colonel Medhurst said. "You told me the other day that you didn't wish me to meet her."

"Did I? I only meant that you probably would not wish to meet her," answered Muriel. "She has come back; but she isn't in the room, as you see, and I am

glad of it, because I have something that I must tell you about her."

"Indeed?" said the colonel, with a startled look. "Surely not that she—but I know that cannot be so. I spoke to your brother—perhaps he told you about it?—and although I could not get him to say that he would turn his back upon Brewster, he seemed to be quite alive to the fact that the man is a scoundrel. It is inconceivable that he can have consented to give his daughter to such a brute. Besides, she has been out of London."

"Yes; and so has Sir Harry Brewster. I had better tell you the truth at once, though of course we do not wish it to be talked about. Sir Harry deliberately followed Sylvia to Morecambe Priory, where she was staying, and he has proposed to her and she has accepted him. It is horrible and shameful; but that is what has happened, and I would rather that you heard of it from me than from somebody else—as I suppose you would have been almost sure to do, sooner or later. Naturally, James has forbidden the engagement and will not allow her to see Sir Harry again; still I am afraid we must not flatter ourselves that the affair can be put an end to in that summary way. Sylvia submits after a fashion; but she declares that she will marry the man as soon as she is of age, and he has given her a release which is nothing more than nominal. My brother is persuaded that it will be all right; I wish I could think so!"

Colonel Medhurst bit his mustache and frowned. Mr. Wentworth had apparently done his duty as a father; but that there should be any question of Sir Harry Brewster's according a release, nominal or otherwise, to the girl whom he had insulted by an offer of marriage, was surely evidence that indulgence had been stretched a little too far.

"She can't possibly marry him, you know," he said in a somewhat sharp tone of voice.

"I hope not," answered Muriel, despondently; "but even if the marriage never takes place, her youth will have been spoilt all the same. What can we do? We are to go abroad immediately, and we shall be away for some months, I believe; but I don't know that the change will make much difference."

Colonel Medhurst's face fell. "You are going abroad!" he echoed, disconsolately. "And when you return, I shall have gone back to my regiment, I suppose. Will you like it?—the going abroad I mean."

"I? Oh, no, I shall not like it at all; but it is not on my account that we are going. Perhaps it is the best thing we can do for Sylvia, though it seems a doubtful sort of remedy. At all events, by taking her away, we shall prevent her seeing or hearing of Sir Harry Brewster."

"I should have thought you might have prevented that without leaving home. And it does seem to me that your wishes are entitled to *some* slight consideration. Won't it be rather a wrench to you to have to give up your visits to the children's hospital and—and all that?"

"Yes; but I am not sure that I mind quite so much as I thought I should. Although I liked being with the children and helping to amuse them, that wasn't the kind of work that I could have gone on with for an indefinite time, and I never intended to stop short there. To tell the truth, I looked upon myself as a sort of probationer; but this afternoon Mr. Compton has completely undeceived me. He never had any idea of admitting me into the Society;. he does not think me fit for it."

"Well, if you come to that," observed Colonel Medhurst, smiling, "neither do I. I think you are fitted for something better than such a life."

"That is absurd. What can be better than to give all that you possess—your money and your labor and your whole heart—to your fellow-creatures? Mr. Compton is convinced that I should never give my whole heart to them; and I can't feel certain that he is mistaken."

"I sincerely trust that he is not," declared Medhurst, who for the moment had forgotten all about Sylvia and Sir Harry Brewster and who was decidedly of opinion that a portion of Miss Wentworth's heart ought to be reserved for less general purposes; "it is easy to serve one's fellow-creatures without taking vows or wearing a poke-bonnet, and though the life of a Sister of Charity may be the best for some exceptional persons, I am sure it can't be the best for everybody."

"Exactly so. I fancied myself an exceptional person, whereas I am nothing of the sort, it appears. You and Mr. Compton may have judged me quite correctly; but I can't pretend to feel exhilarated by your judgment, and that is one reason why I don't so very much object to leaving the country."

"I understand," gravely observed Colonel Medhurst—who, however, did not understand in the least. "I am sorry that you should have been disappointed; but I confess I shan't be sorry if your disappointment causes you to give up the notions that you have had. I wish you weren't going away though!"

"Thank you; but I should imagine that there can hardly be another individual in London whose absence would be less noticed or less regretted. I am taking with me the only two human beings who want me; and it is doubtful whether even they are conscious of wanting me. There's no use in wondering; still I do wonder for what possible purpose I can have been sent into the world!"

Colonel Medhurst was deeply and honestly in love; but perhaps he had passed the age at which lovers are blind to any absurdities that can be uttered by the objects of their adoration. "All that," he exclaimed, laughing, "because Compton is wise enough and kind enough to forbid your taking a leap in the dark."

"No; not because of that, but because I feel that I am useless and that I always shall be useless. You, being a man, can't understand what I mean or what there is to make such a fuss about. A man has his profession: if he doesn't distinguish himself in it, at least it gives him work, and perhaps he doesn't particularly care about being distinguished. But women—or, at all events, women who are like me—must either be something out of the ordinary or else nothing at all. Is it a sign of inordinate vanity or ambition that I can't submit very cheerfully to the prospect of being nothing at all?"

"It is certainly no sign of vanity, and there isn't anything to be ashamed of in ambition. Only I should like to convince you, if I could, that the prospect before you is not in the least what you say it is."

Muriel shook her head. "I'm afraid you won't be able to do that," said she.

"I'll have a try, anyhow, though I know that in about an hour's time I shall repent of having said what I am going to say. Now, Miss Wentworth, what is the matter with you is just this—isn't it?—that you think nobody cares for you. I wouldn't for the world accuse you of a yearning to be loved, which I suppose you would consider a very maudlin and school-girlish sort of sentiment; but when you come to think of it, it amounts to pretty much the same thing, and it's a wish which is common to all mortals whether they admit it or not. You say you want to be of use; but isn't your real meaning that you want to feel yourself essential to somebody or other's happiness?"

"To the best of my belief, I only mean what I say," answered Muriel. "But Mr. Compton has put me out of all conceit with myself, and if you demonstrate to me that I am a humbug, you won't astonish me. Well; to whose happiness am I essential?"

"Oh, only to mine, so far as I know; but my reason for making that ridiculous confession—because of course it is rather ridiculous—is that it may suggest consolatory inferences to you. If, without making any effort to do so, and indeed without the faintest suspicion of what you have done, you can win the heart of an elderly well-seasoned colonel of cavalry and can reduce him to such a condition of idiocy that he worships the very ground you tread upon, doesn't it seem to follow that you can win other people's hearts easily enough? Other people you may be sure, will turn up. The right person may not be the first or the second or the third, but he will make his appearance some day, and when he does—well, I presume that you will feel very grateful to Compton and very thankful that you are not a Sister of Charity."

Never, perhaps, was a declaration of love worded in a manner more awkward to respond to. Muriel was genuinely surprised and taken aback; but her annoyance was greater than her surprise. Colonel Medhurst, she thought, had no business to place her in so embarrassing a position. An offer of marriage may be declined, with a suitable expressions of sympathy and regret: but what is to be said to a man who avows himself a lover,

yet abstains from putting himself forward as a suitor?

"I can't imagine that you are speaking seriously," she said at length, in default of any better rejoinder.

"I am as serious as it is possible to be, although I don't wonder at your scepticism. Falling in love is what nobody can help: it may be a blessing or a misfortune, according to circumstances; but I don't deny that a man of my age who falls in love with a girl of yours deserves to be laughed at."

"Age has nothing to do with it," returned Muriel; "look at Sylvia and Sir Harry Brewster! Only——"

"Only if I were five-and-twenty, that wouldn't help me? Well, that may or may not be so; one can't tell. In any event, I am quite aware that I am not the right person of whom I was speaking just now, and I only mentioned my case by way of an example and an illustration. However, since I have mentioned it, I shan't make matters worse by dwelling upon it for one minute more. There is a sort of satisfaction, which I am sure you won't grudge me, in telling you what I believe to be the truth, that nobody can ever love you more than I do. I won't say that nobody will ever love you as much, because that would be nonsense, I suppose; but I want you, if you will, to let me be your friend still and to remember that if at any time I can be of service to you, you will do me the greatest of kindnesses by telling me so. I shall be quartered at Colchester for the next two years, in all probability. Now I'll say no more about myself. I wonder whether I have comforted you at all by letting you into my secret."

By this time Muriel had recovered her self-possession and was able to frame something in the shape of a fitting reply. She did not say that Colonel Medhurst's avowal had comforted her, nor did she think it worth while to point out to him how wide he was of the mark in his estimate of her requirements; but she assured him that she was not ungrateful for the high compliment that he had paid her, and she expressed the hope which every woman who refuses an offer is bound to express, that he would soon meet with somebody more worthy of his affection than she could pretend to be.

He made her feel somewhat ashamed of her trite phrases by ignoring them and merely answering that his back was abroad enough for his burden.

"As you said just now, a man has always his profession, and I have been tolerably lucky in mine, so that there is no great danger of my being superannuated. I shall reconcile myself to my fate somehow or other, and I hope and think that you will reconcile yourself to yours. Only, if I might ask a small favor of you, it would be that you will allow me credit for knowing my own mind."

She might have retorted that that was more than he had been willing to allow her; but she did not, and she cried a little after he had gone away. It was not that she regretted the refusal which he had taken for granted; she did not love him, and for marrying in the abstract she had no inclination. Still it seemed a great pity that she could not be satisfied with what would satisfy the generality of women, and she was more sorry for herself than she was for the man who had proclaimed his ability to reconcile himself to his fate.

To grumble because one differs from the rest of one's species is, no doubt, a form of complaint to which the rest of the species find it difficult to listen with patience; yet we, who enjoy the blessing of being commonplace, should not be too hard upon those who do not share our advantages. After all, they are not to blame. Their peculiarities result from heredity, or from the conformation of the skull, or from some cause for which poor human nature cannot be held responsible, and we are still as far as ever from being able to answer that queer question, "Did this man sin, or his parents, that he was born blind?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE average young Englishman of the present period is, as all fair-minded observers will acknowledge, equal in respect of manly attributes to his predecessors. He is probably not much more of a fool than they used to be; if he cannot be said to have made any great advance upon their intellectual level, he seems to have scored a point or two against them in a physical sense, and when called upon to fight he is seldom found wanting. There are, of course, exceptions; but the smooth-shaven pseudo-sportsmen of to-day are not more representative of their class than were the Dundrearys of a former epoch, and a fair proportion even of these are, it may be, formed of more solid stuff than might be inferred from their manners and appearance.

It was, for instance, far more poor Johnny Hill's misfortune than his fault that the greater part of his time was spent in loafing aimlessly about the streets of London, that he was a frequenter of music-halls, a diligent reader of sporting papers, and that he did what in him lay to earn the enviable reputation of being no end of a dog. In early life one must needs have ambitions of one kind or another, and that his had taken this somewhat ignoble form, was chiefly due to circumstances beyond his control. His home was in London; he was very well off; he had passed through public school and university life without having the good luck to secure any friends whose friendship was worth possessing; he had a mother who worshipped him and of whose wisdom and knowledge he entertained, by one of those strange perversities for which there is no accounting, an exalted opinion; finally, he was rather stupid and unaffectedly humble. Something might have been made of him if he had been put

into the army; but nothing was likely to be made of him now, except an oaf—which indeed was the unflattering description that was too often given of him by his acquaintances.

It was the description that had always been given of him by Sylvia Wentworth, to whom in all probability, he would never have dreamt of raising his eyes, had he not been urged thereto by maternal anxiety. Mrs. Hill rather liked being told that her son belonged to a fast set, and her pride was gratified when she heard that he was upon terms of intimacy with certain harum-scarum young noblemen; but as she did not wish him to ruin himself, even in aristocratic company, she had made up her mind that the best thing to do was to provide him as speedily as might be with a charming wife, by whose aid he might hope to achieve social successes of a less perilous order. It was by her instigation that he had begun to pay his addresses to Sylvia, and of this duty he had at first, it must be confessed, acquitted himself grudgingly and of necessity; for, unassuming though he was, he did not particularly enjoy being snubbed, nor did the young lady find favor in his eyes. But by degrees his point of view underwent a change. Sylvia, who was nothing if not capricious, did not always snub him; sometimes—when she wanted to annoy somebody else—she even gave him marked encouragement; moreover, the difficulty of the task which he had taken in hand, and which became every day more perceptible to him, affected him as difficulty is apt to affect the majority of human beings. He was now as determined to win Sylvia Wentworth for his wife as a diffident and not oversanguine youth could be, and it had been of his own accord, not as the result of any promptings on his mother's part, that he had sought out Mr. Wentworth for the purpose of denouncing Sir Harry Brewster. His mother, in fact, knew nothing about Sir Harry Brewster; for he had refrained from mentioning that graceless personage to her, being aware that she was capable of serious indiscretions when excited, and fearing lest she should rush straight off to Upper Brook Street and say things which it would be more prudent to leave unsaid.

It was not from Mr. Wentworth that Mrs. Hill was likely to obtain any information upon the subject to Sylvia's escapade; but he did call upon her one afternoon for the sake of seeing what sort of a face she would make on being told that he proposed to take his family to the South of France for a few months, and the consequence of this visit was that her son found her much agitated at breakfast time on the following morning.

"At what time did you come home last night?" she began. "Well, I won't ask; though I do think it must be injurious to health to keep such late hours. I sat up for you as long as I could; but one can't sit up until daylight. At least, I can't."

"Of course not," answered Johnny, "and I wish you wouldn't sit up for me. What's the good of it?"

"I wanted to see you, because I had some news to give you. Very unpleasant news too, I call it. Mr. Wentworth was here yesterday afternoon. He came to say good-bye; for it seems that they are all going abroad immediately and won't be back much before the summer."

"Quite right," muttered Johnny, meditatively. "Very glad to hear it."

"Glad to hear it, you extraordinary boy! What do you mean? I do trust there has been no foolish quarrel between you and dear Sylvia."

"Oh, no; nothing of that sort," answered Johnny, somewhat confused; "but——but she isn't very strong, you know, and it's as well to get away from the spring east winds."

"Rubbish! she is as strong as I am; I never saw a girl with a better color. Now Johnny, mark my words: if Sylvia Wentworth leaves England without being engaged to you, it will be your own fault, and I won't answer for the consequences. You must remember that she has a fortune, or the prospect of one, and that there are sure to be plenty of needy fortune-hunters at such places as Cannes and Nice. The time has come for you to assert yourself, unless you wish to be elbowed out of the way by somebody else."

Johnny was by no means sure that he had not already

been elbowed out of the way; yet he recognized that his mother's advice was sound in itself, although offered in ignorance of all the circumstances, and he resolved to act upon it. If the worst came to the worst, he could lose nothing by having made his own position clear. Sylvia would very likely reject him; but at least she should know that, whatever might happen, she would have his unalterable love to fall back upon. He therefore fortified himself with an additional glass of sherry at luncheon, and immediately afterwards drove to Upper Brook Street, where, as he had anticipated would be the case, he ascertained that Mr. Wentworth was at home. He was shown at his request, into that gentleman's study and was offered a cigarette, which he declined. However certain one may feel of being refused, it is but prudent to refrain from smoking upon the eve of making an offer of marriage.

"It sounds rather rude to inquire what has procured me the pleasure of your visit," remarked Mr. Wentworth (who in truth could have answered his own question without any difficulty), "but you so seldom honor me in this way that I must plead guilty to a shade of curiosity."

"You remember what I said to you the other day," replied Johnny. "You advised me not to be in too great a hurry. Well, I don't know that I should be in any hurry if there were time for me to feel my way; but it seems that there isn't. My mother tells me that you are going abroad, and I think I can guess why you are going."

Mr. Wentworth did not care to confirm or refute any conjectures that his visitor might have formed; but he smilingly acknowledged the accuracy of his information. "Oh, yes, we are going abroad," said he. "Is there any particular reason why you shouldn't go abroad too?"

"With you, do you mean?" asked Johnny, flushing suddenly.

"Well, no. Pleasant as your company would be, I could hardly recommend in your own interests that you should offer it to us. But I should think that you might follow us without too much indiscretion. Every British citizen is entitled to travel in foreign lands, and a toler-

ably large number avail themselves of the privilege."

"Yes; but upon the whole I think I would rather speak before you go and get it done with," answered Johnny, doubtfully. "I daresay that may not be the best policy; but it seems to me to be the most straightforward. Is Miss Sylvia at home?—and may I see her?"

"I believe she is at home, and you can see her in the drawing-room, because Muriel has gone out. Only I warn you that you must be prepared for the results of precipitation."

"I am quite prepared for them," Johnny declared, "I only want her to know the truth. I'm not the sort of fellow to change my mind, and although I suppose she will have nothing to say to me now, a day may come when she will think differently about it. Anyhow, I mean to tell her that I love her before she leaves the country."

"As you please," returned Mr. Wentworth, ringing the bell. "I am quite inclined to agree with you as to the main question; I would only venture to suggest that for the present you should be content to accept such an answer as you may get, without inquiring too closely into motives."

Johnny was not so dull but that he could appreciate the significance of that hint; he had, too, a rudimentary chivalry in his composition which would in any case have prevented him from pressing the girl whom he loved to make further confessions than she was disposed to make. Nevertheless, so unequivocal a confirmation of his fears was discouraging, and it was in a somewhat hopeless and dejected mood that he followed the butler upstairs.

Sylvia, who had been informed that Mr. Hill wished to speak with her, and who of course divined his errand, was waiting to receive him in the drawing-room. Had he presented himself a week or two earlier, he would doubtless have met with rough treatment at her hands, for hers was not a temperament to sympathize with the sentimental woes of mankind; but now that she was involved in love troubles of her own, her heart had

become softened towards all fellow-sufferers, and she greeted this inadmissible wooer quite kindly.

"Have you come to say good-bye?" she asked. "You have heard perhaps that we are starting in a few days for some destination unknown? Papa has discovered all of a sudden that the climate of our native land isn't good for us, and we are to move into warmer latitudes."

Johnny signified that this was no news to him. "I came to say good-bye; but I wanted to say something more than that," he explained—for there seemed to be no use in beating about the bush—"I couldn't let you go without telling you what I daresay you don't need to be told—that I love you. Now I know just what you'll think: it's average impertinence of a plain-headed, dull-witted beggar like me to ask you to be his wife. But I'm not asking for that; I've sense enough to understand that you'd precious soon send me about my business if I did. The only thing I ask for is that you'll bear me in mind. You see, one never knows what is going to happen, and things often turn out quite differently from what one expects, and I suppose that it isn't impossible that some day you may feel as if—as if you had better marry, though you may have no special fancy for one person more than another. And then perhaps you may say to yourself, 'Well, there's Johnny Hill. Not much to look at, and a first-class duffer at most things, but well-meaning in his way and devoted to me. I might do worse than take him.' And really you might do worse; for it's something to have a husband who will never attempt to make himself out your superior; besides which, there are what your father calls my special advantages—meaning that I have a comfortable income to offer. So I hope you'll think of me in that way—as a second string, you understand."

Probably this was the very longest speech that Johnny Hill had ever made in his life. It may not be considered a masterpiece of eloquence; but it was really neither ill-conceived nor ill-expressed, since it produced exactly the effect upon its hearer that it was intended to produce. Sylvia quite understood all that he had left unsaid, and appreciated the delicacy to which his reticence was due.

She also appreciated his modesty and fidelity, little though such qualities appealed to her as a general rule. Still she did not herself care to be reticent, not being ashamed of her love for Sir Harry Brewster, and being unwilling to give anybody an excuse for imagining that she was ashamed of it. Therefore it was that she saw fit to reply:

"It is very good of you to speak as you do. I ought to be grateful to you, and so I am, and I am sorry if I have ever done anything to make you believe that I could possibly marry you. But that is quite impossible, and I daresay papa has told you why it is impossible."

Johnny shook his head. "Oh, no," he answered; "Mr. Wentworth told me nothing, except that I hadn't much chance of success—and I knew that before."

"I thought he might have told you the truth; but, as he hasn't, I will tell you myself; I don't wish it to be kept secret. I am engaged to be married to Sir Harry Brewster, and if I don't marry him I shall never marry at all. Of course the engagement has been forbidden, and that is why we are going abroad; but they might just as well have allowed me to stay at home. It will all come to the same thing in the long run."

Johnny looked grave and dismayed. "I didn't know that matters had gone as far as that," he remarked in a low voice.

"Well, you knew that they would go as far; I am sure you did from what you said just now. You meant me to understand that if I couldn't get what I had set my heart upon, and if I felt dull and miserable at home, I might fall back upon you. I hope I shall never be such a wretch as to take advantage of your generosity; but that *was* what you meant, wasn't it?"

"Well, something of the kind," Johnny confessed. "Yes; that is really what I mean. Only I am very sorry that you have given Sir Harry Brewster a right to call himself engaged to you, because I don't see how such an engagement can ever come to anything, and I wouldn't trust him to hold his tongue about it."

"I don't want him to hold his tongue about it," Sylvia declared, proudly; "so far as I am concerned, he is

welcome to proclaim it from the housetops. He won't do that, though; for he is a gentleman, and he considers me a great deal more than he does himself."

"Yet he asked you to marry him," observed Johnny, pertinently.

"No, he didn't. He told me that he cared for me, and I don't believe he would have done that if hadn't seen that I eared for him. What is the use of blaming people for things that they cannot help? I shouldn't have fallen in love with a divorced man for choice, nor, I daresay, would he have fallen in love with a girl young enough to be his daughter; but one can't command one's feelings and one can't alter them. If you are sincere, you must know that from your own experience. You would be glad to put me altogether out of your head if you could, wouldn't you?"

Johnny pinched his lower lip between his finger and thumb dubiously; he was not certain that he would prefer the relief of oblivion to his present forlorn condition, nor was he quite convinced that the human will is so feeble a force as Sylvia had represented it to be. But he agreed with her that there would be very little use in blaming either her or his rival.

"I think I had better go now," said he, rising and holding out his hand. "Mr. Wentworth was so good as to suggest that I might follow you abroad; but I shan't do that. It wouldn't help me and would only worry you. However, it can't be any worry to you to know that your second string will be at your service as long as he lives, and, as I said before, a time may come when you won't be sorry to have a second string."

Sylvia, while taking his hand, assured him earnestly that that time would never come; it would be no kindness, she said, to allow him to delude himself with vain hopes. Nevertheless, he took his hopes, such as they were, away with him and left behind him a better impression than he had any idea of. Probably there does not exist the woman who can remain wholly unmoved by the spectacle of desperate, disinterested fidelity—always supposing, that is to say, that she is herself its object.

"So Johnny Hill has been offering his hand and heart,

and has been dismissed with a flea in his ear," remarked Mr. Wentworth to his sister when he returned from the club before dinner.

"Yes," answered Muriel. "I am sorry for the poor boy, and so, to do her justice, is Sylvia. Did she tell you about it?"

"No; but the guileless Johnny called after luncheon to inform me of his intentions and to request that he might see her. My mother-wit enabled me to forecast the result of the interview. Well, he will live to fight another day, and I don't suppose he will have done himself any harm by this preliminary skirmish. I recommended him to follow us to the continent, and no doubt his mother will spur him on to make that effort. In fact, I shouldn't wonder if she were to accompany him, which would be great fun. By the way, I rather think of trying Biarritz to start with. Have you anything against that plan?"

All places were the same to Muriel, and she said so. It occurred to her that all places were as much open to Sir Harry Brewster as to Johnny Hill; but this she did not say, knowing that the observation would not be well received. Mr. Wentworth was strongly averse to meeting trouble half-way, and he had evidently succeeded in persuading himself that he would have no more trouble with Sir Harry Brewster.

CHAPTER XVII.

In the days when a Spanish lady set the fashions and to some extent ruled the destinies of France, Biarritz, which was at that time, and is still, the favorite autumn resort of Spaniards, acquired a world-wide reputation. Indeed, with its little land-locked port, its fine stretch of sands and its exposure to the whole width of the Atlantic and every wind that blows therefrom, it is a pleasant enough bathing-place for sunwearied southerners to find within their reach; but why the inhabitants of more northern climes should betake themselves thither during the winter months is one of those mysteries which can only be explained by the well-known eccentricity of the Anglo-Saxon race. It is very little warmer than Devonshire, it is quite as rainy and infinitely less beautiful; the district in which it is situated is barren and shadeless, its houses are, as a rule, badly built and of course it is as impossible there, as it is everywhere else in France, to obtain firewood which will warm the room or even keep alight at all without constant attention. Yet a tolerably large contingent of English people have for many years past spent the cold months in that storm-vexed spot, and not a few of them are ready to affirm that they would rather do that than stay at home.

With these deluded beings Mr. Wentworth, bringing an unprejudiced mind to bear upon the subject, found himself quite unable to agree. The climate of Biarritz was, he admitted, a shade superior to the climate of London; but when he said that (and the same might be said of Brighton) what more was there to be urged in favor of the place? Certainly there was a club; but it was not much of a club; social entertainments were few and far between, nor did it greatly console

him to be assured on all hands that as soon as Lent was over there would be plenty of dancing. He wanted to dine, he didn't want to dance, and he bitterly regretted the precipitation with which he had hired a villa for three months. Muriel, to be sure, had undertaken to pay the rent of the villa; but he did not feel himself any the less a fixture on that account. After all, one has a conscience, and there is such a thing as over-riding a willing horse. He could not propose to decamp forthwith; all he could do was to grumble, of which solace he did not stint himself.

Had he been less occupied with his own causes for dissatisfaction he might have noticed that his daughter was in no better case than he was. Sylvia, in truth, was bored to death. It was not only that the acquaintances whom she had made or who had turned up in Biarritz failed to amuse her; it was not only that she had nothing to do, except to take long walks—probably of all forms of physical exercise the most unserviceable and depressing—but it was beginning to dawn upon her that she had miscalculated her strength. It was one thing to feel sure of her fidelity to Sir Harry and another to count with equal confidence upon his fidelity to her, now that they were separated and deprived of all means of communication. In spite of herself, she could not help remembering what she had heard about his numerous love-affairs; she could not help doubting whether it was possible for her to be to him all that he was to her, and sometimes, while she lay awake at night, she was oppressed by painful misgivings as to what had at first seemed to her to be the futility of the measures adopted by her relatives. Now, it is a very bad thing for young people to lie awake at night; it is still a worse thing for them to be careworn; and what perhaps is the very worst thing in the world for the health of both young and old is suspense. Sylvia, who had never been robust, distressed her aunt by growing thin and pale, as well as by the petulance of her temper, which had led her to spurn all efforts at sympathy and resent any allusion to her fragile looks. There was one subject, and only one, with regard to which sympathy

would have been welcome to her; and upon that subject Muriel was not prepared to touch.

Yet what was to be done with the girl? What had been attempted was evidently not proving effectual, and the dread of that contingency which Compton had foreseen was ever present to her perplexed aunt. Cruel though it might be to be hope for it, the best thing to hope for seemed to be that Sir Harry might show himself worthy of the character which he had earned and might take up with somebody else.

Mr. Wentworth, at all events, was cynical enough to hold that opinion, and if any gossip to the above effect had reached his ears, he would have hastened to impart it to his daughter. In the absence of any such good news, he had to content himself with an article in a society paper, the writer of which, commenting upon the announcement that Sir Harry Brewster was about to retire from the turf and that his diminished stud would shortly be brought to the hammer, was pleased to dwell in a tone of virtuous severity upon the sins and follies of the ill-starred baronet. It was melancholy, this stern censor of public morality declared, to contemplate the wreck of a life which twenty years ago had seemed full of the brightest promise. Sir Harry Brewster had started with almost every advantage that a fairy godmother could have bestowed upon him; he had had good birth, good looks, wealth and capacities which, if he had cared to make use of them, would probably have proved to be much above the average. He had chosen to squander his money, to devote all his talents to the equivocal purpose of trying to get the better of the ring, and as for his handsome face (now a thing of the past), the manner in which he had seen fit to turn that to account was, unhappily, only too notorious. It was impossible to feel any compassion for one who had so persistently shown himself his own enemy; but it was permissible to regret the degeneration and probable extinction of an ancient family.

Mr. Wentworth could not resist reading this admirable extract aloud to his sister and his daughter, whom he found sitting upon a couple of wicker chairs near the

shore and trying to persuade themselves that because they were were in latitude 43 degs. north of the equator they were not shivering with cold.

"The Press is not over and above merciful to our friend Brewster," he remarked; "but who is merciful to a bankrupt? The first duty of every civilized being is to avoid bankruptcy."

Sylvia made no rejoinder; but Muriel, after a pause, observed that bankruptcy was not the only or the chief offence laid to Sir Harry Brewster's charge. She was sorry that her brother had been ill-advised enough to introduce a topic which would have been better left alone, and after he had strolled away she said so. "Only," she added, "I can't pretend to think that there was any injustice in the newspaper article."

"Who asks you to think so or pretend to think so?" returned Sylvia irritably. "What does it matter whether you think so or not? Papa is quite right; the one unpardonable crime that he has committed is losing his money. But, you see, that is a crime for which I don't feel the slightest difficulty in pardoning him."

Muriel sighed. "And the others?" she asked. "Can you pardon those so easily?"

"Yes, of course I can, because he hadn't even seen me in those days, and they are over and done with. At least, I hope they are."

There was an interrogative ring about the last words which was not devoid of pathos and of which Muriel quite understood the meaning.

"Isn't it better not to hope when there is so little ground for hope?" was all she could bring herself to say by way of consolation.

Sylvia turned upon her half fiercely, half tearfully. "I knew you would say that!" she exclaimed. "You don't want me to marry him, and you think that if you can't carry your point in any other way, you may do it by making me jealous and suspicious. You are wrong, though; for I am not such an idiot as you suppose."

Then, with the characteristic inconsequence of her sex, she suddenly burst out crying, and, between her sobs, besought her aunt to take her away somewhere—anywhere.

"I can't bear this horrible place any longer," she declared; "it is killing me! If I had something to do or something to see, it would be different; but here I can only think and think and—and sometimes horrid thoughts come into my head. I don't really doubt him—I would rather die than doubt him; but it is so dreadful to know nothing!" She broke into a somewhat hysterical laugh as she added, "Wouldn't you like to take a trip into Spain? I don't think I should; but at all events Spain has one immense merit—it isn't Biarritz."

Muriel was unable to hold out against that piteous appeal. It was doubtless desirable that the poor girl should forget Sir Harry, and it might also be desirable that she should suspect him, since there was every reason for suspecting him; but it could not be desirable that she should make herself ill. Accordingly it was suggested, the same evening, to Mr. Wentworth that three or four weeks spent in Madrid, Seville and Granada would form an agreeable break in the monotony of their present existence, and Mr. Wentworth, on receiving comforting assurances as to the expense of the proposed journey, jumped at the suggestion. He had not liked to complain, he said, forgetting, perhaps, that he had complained pretty loudly, but he must confess that of all the beastly holes he had ever found himself in in his life, Biarritz was far and away the beastliest. Muriel could not possibly long for a change more than he did.

So it came to pass that, a few days later, this discontented trio set forth under the charge of an experienced courier for a country which can boast of infinite attractions and is replete with the small discomforts which, in the eyes of travellers who, like Mr. Wentworth, value their personal well-being above all things, more than outweigh any enjoyment that can be derived from pictures or architecture or scenery. They spent a day at Burgos, and two of them admired the cathedral and visited the Cartuja, while the third bemoaned himself over the barbarous fare provided for them; then they went on to Madrid, where they found a comparatively luxurious hotel, and where Mr. Wentworth, in some degree com-

forted, proposed that they should remain for at least a week.

"You can't possibly do justice to the place in less time than that," he declared; "it takes every uneducated person a full week to appreciate Velasquez, and without incivility I may say that you have neither of you received a thorough education in art. Then you will want to make excursions to the Escorial and Aranjuez, and I suppose it will be our duty to witness a bull-fight. Besides, how do we know what horrors await us further south? Let us at least fortify ourselves by a course of moderately decent dinners before we start again upon this voyage of adventure and discovery."

He met with no opposition from the ladies, to both of whom it was in truth a matter of indifference whether they were at Madrid or Seville. They were not in a mood for sight-seeing; yet sight-seeing gave them an occupation if it did not precisely furnish them with entertainment, and the color began to return to Sylvia's cheeks after a day or two of the hard labor which their conscientious courier would not permit them to shirk.

That benevolent tyrant refused to listen to their prejudiced remonstrances upon the subject of bull-fights. In every country, as he justly pointed out, there exist national sports, and it is not more cruel to kill a bull than to kill a fox or a hare. The horses?—well, to be sure, it was not very pretty to see the poor horses dying, and many ladies disliked it; but they were only broken-down old animals, doomed to be slaughtered by the knacker even if they escaped the horns of the bull. He concluded by affirming, truly or untruly, that no English lady ever passed through Madrid without paying at least one visit to the Plaza de Toros.

Influenced by these representations, the two English ladies with whom this narrative is concerned took their places one Sunday afternoon, amongst several thousand other spectators, in the amphitheatre which is as essential to the existence of the Madrileños of to-day as ever the *circenses* were to the Roman populace of old. A bull-fight is probably a degrading spectacle. It may not be actually more cruel then battue-shooting; but there is

certainly a difference as regards moral effect between what is generally understood in this country by sport and merely looking on at an encounter in which some animals are sure to meet with a painful death, while several human beings may possibly do so. Perhaps too, the size of the animals engaged should be taken into account; for it is never wise to familiarize crowds with the sight of blood. At the same time, it is only fair to admit that those who have succeeded in overcoming (and nothing is more easily overcome) the physical sensation of faintness which may have been bestowed upon them by Nature as some protection against their ferocious instincts, are not likely to get much additional harm from witnessing the final struggle between the matador and the bull. An infuriated bull is an ugly customer: to despatch him artistically, or even to despatch him at all, is a feat demanding great skill, nerve and presence of mind. These are manly qualities; the exhibition of them can hardly be demoralizing; and although in nine cases out of ten the result of the duel is, of course, a foregone conclusion, it may be hoped that such is not the view taken of it by the bull, who, when all is said, is killed in no unmerciful or inglorious fashion.

However, Muriel Wentworth will never be able to deliver a dispassionate judgment upon the point; for when she had seen three horses disembowelled she could bear it no longer, and had to be taken back to the hotel by the courier, who was much annoyed at being thus defrauded of his afternoon's amusement. Sylvia, though sickened, managed to stand to her guns, and her philosophical father experienced no inconvenience.

"It is a butchery," he remarked; "but butcheries take place every day in the shambles with our full consent and approval. Muriel, I imagine, is not more tender-hearted than you and I; she is only afflicted with a rather weaker stomach."

They accordingly saw two bulls killed, and were to some extent infected by the frenzied enthusiasm of their fellow-spectators, although they scarcely knew enough about the conditions of the combat to appreciate the display of courage and dexterity which had evoked it.

But the third bull was sulky and gave trouble. He would not play the game; he refused to charge when he was expected to charge, and he had to be goaded and tormented before his spirit could be aroused. All this was not very pleasant, nor, when the beast had been maddened up to the required point, were the results such as could have been wished. The wearied horses, whom their riders made no effort to protect, were gored one after the other in a manner which caused even the case-hardened ladies in the mantillas to put up their fans, and when an overthrown picador had been carried, dead or insensible, from the arena, Sylvia suddenly started up, saying that she had had enough of it.

"Very well," answered her father, looking somewhat alarmed and a good deal vexed. "I'll take you away then; only for the love of Heaven don't be so inconsiderate as to faint! Remember that I can't speak a word of the language, and that that fool of a courier, who ought to have been back long ago, isn't in sight. I suppose we shall be able to get a vehicle of some sort or kind outside."

Sylvia was by no means sure that she was not going to faint. She stumbled after Mr. Wentworth, who hastily made his way down to the entrance of the bull-ring, and could do no more than nod when he asked her whether she was capable of remaining upon her feet for a few minutes while he went to look for a carriage.

But one kind of emotion is often cured by another, and a shock was in store for Sylvia which at once banished all memory of bulls and mangled horses and picadors from her mind. For it was Sir Harry Brewster's voice that whispered in her ear, "Don't be frightened; I'll take care of you until your father comes back." And it was Sir Harry Brewster's face that was close to hers, and his arm that was extended, as though to support her. But no such support was necessary.

"You!" she exclaimed, the color rushing back to her cheeks and lips—"Oh, how glad I am! Where have you come from!" Then, recollecting herself, she added, "But you ought not to be here, ought you?"

He laughed a little and shrugged his shoulders depre-

catingly. "No; I ought not; but what would you have? All my life I have been doing things that I ought not to have done and leaving undone the things that I ought to have done. How am I to explain it all? I suppose they wouldn't let me call upon you?"

Sylvia shook her head despondently. "Oh, no," she answered. "I am quite sure they wouldn't. But I *must* see you once; I want to hear—I want to tell you—oh, I can't help it's being wrong! Can you be at the picture-gallery to-morrow afternoon between three and four? I think I could persuade Muriel to leave me there, because she is going to visit some orphanage or other; but of course I can't promise."

"I will be there at all events, upon the chance," he answered.

"Then go away quickly now before papa sees you. I am quite well; I don't require anybody to look after me. Go at once, or you will ruin everything."

Sir Harry obeyed, only just in time; for now Mr. Wentworth hurried up, saying,

"I've secured a shandrydan; come along, Sylvia. Well, I'm glad to see that you are looking a little less ghastly than you did; but I shall not be found escorting two women to view the favorite pastime of this enlightened land again."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE Museo of Madrid contains, as everybody knows, one of the finest collections of paintings in the world, and Mr. Wentworth had been quite justified in representing that a week is not too long a time to devote to the study of its treasures. But it was not of Murillo or Velasquez that Sir Harry Brewster was thinking as he uneasily paced the gallery in fulfilment of his tryst with Sylvia Wentworth, nor in truth did he bestow a single glance upon the works of those great masters of their art. What he was thinking of, and what made him decidedly uncomfortable, was that he was about to commit an underhand and dishonorable action; for he was, after a fashion which it is unnecessary to analyze, an honorable man. He would have been the first to admit that he was an unscrupulous sort of sinner; but he was hampered—who is not?—by a few scruples, and he could not behave as he was now behaving without doing violence to one of these. Yet he had not been allowed much choice in the matter; it had been Sylvia, not he, who had made an appointment which he almost hoped that she might be prevented from keeping, and by his way of thinking, it would have been altogether out of the question to meet her with a refusal.

But it must be confessed that all his doubts and self-reproach was forgotten when, after waiting for a quarter of an hour, he saw the slim, girlish figure, which of late had always been present to his mental vision, advancing towards him with quick steps. He knew now how terribly disappointed he would have been if she had not come, and he said as much while he pressed her hand and drew her away to a bench as secluded from public observation as any that he could discover.

"Ah, you might have been sure that I would come,"

she answered. "I was afraid that there would be some bother about it, but fortunately there was none. Muriel knows that orphanages are not in my line, and she believes that pictures may be. If the carriage doesn't come for me in an hour, I am to find my own way home; so it is all right. Now tell me what extraordinary chance has brought you to Madrid."

"There's nothing very extraordinary about it," Sir Harry replied. "I came here to see you, and I came because I found that I couldn't live without seeing you—that's all. I went to Biarritz knowing that you were there, and thinking that I might perhaps get a glimpse of you now and then—for I give you my word of honor that I never meant to accost you—and when I heard that you had left for Spain I followed. My meeting you yesterday was a pure accident; I shouldn't have thought of speaking to you if I hadn't been really afraid that you were going to faint."

Sylvia took no heed of his apologies: apologies might be due to her father, but for her own part she did not require them.

"Is that really true?" she asked, for the pleasure of hearing him say it again; "couldn't you really live without seeing me? Well, do you know, that is just how I was beginning to feel myself. It seemed to me that unless I could see you again I should die."

Sir Harry made the reply which everybody else in the world, good, bad or indifferent, would have made. These two persons were doubtless culpable; they had no business to be exchanging vows of eternal fidelity; they had bound themselves tacitly, if not in so many words, to refrain from doing anything of the kind; but they loved one another, and it would be absurd to demand of any mortal couple, so situated, that they should meet without reiterating at great length what both of them already knew. Of the two, Sir Harry appeared to be the more conscientious; for, after a considerable lapse of time, he said:

"This is all wrong, you know. If Mr. Wentworth were to walk in here all of a sudden, I should look uncommonly like a scoundrel."

"He won't walk in," answered Sylvia, composedly; "he has received a batch of newspapers from England, and he has fallen asleep over them. Besides, people shouldn't expect impossibilities. I thought I could get on for two or three years without a sight of you; but I find that I can't——and you can't get on without a sight of me. After all, what harm can there be in our meeting, since separating us doesn't make us forget each other."

"Well, we know that separating us is useless; but others, naturally enough, don't agree. Anyhow, I think we ought to be open and above board about it. How would it be if I were to go straight back to your hotel with you now and tell your father exactly how matters stand? Most likely he has discrimination enough to understand that I am not a liar, and he will believe that I didn't come to Madrid with any intention of arranging clandestine meetings. Of course he will forbid me to dog your steps; but then I shall answer frankly that I won't undertake to be within reach of you and to look the other way if accident should bring us together. I don't know that it will be altogether fair of me to make such a speech; but at least it will be straight, and, after making it, I shall feel that I am deceiving nobody."

This was essentially a man's view; perhaps Sylvia did not differ very greatly from the rest of her sex in that it struck her as a ridiculous and unpractical one. She protested against it with great vehemence and earnestness; she said (and this was obviously the fact) that the only effect of defying Mr. Wentworth in such a manner would be to exasperate him and to condemn her to a life of virtual imprisonment.

"And we are not really deceiving him," she urged; "we told him from the first that he would not be able to part us permanently. The only difference is that he hasn't been able to part us even temporarily."

Then she brought forward her own plan of action, which was not devoid of temptation to an easily tempted man. In a few days they would be moving southwards; they were to spend some time at Seville, Granada and Cordova; what was to prevent Sir Harry from visiting these historic cities? And if, by the kindness of the Fates,

an opportunity should offer for some surreptitious meeting in the Alhambra or the Alcazar, what injury could be done to any human being by two true lovers availing themselves of it? A cynic might have been tickled at the spectacle of a middle-aged man of the world allowing his better judgment to be overruled by the sophistries of a girl in her teens; but Sir Harry Brewster was not a cynic; added to which, very few men have a sufficiently keen sense of humor to derive amusement from their own weaknesses. He ended by yielding, though he did not disguise the reluctance with which he yielded.

"We are sure to be found out sooner or later," he remarked, "and I can't help thinking that the sooner we are found out the better."

"For you perhaps it might be, but not for me," returned Sylvia. And indeed it was obvious that there was a grain of truth in that assertion.

Meanwhile, their present interview was perforce brought to an end by a solemn official who came to announce to them that the gallery was about to be closed for the day.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Sylvia, glancing at her watch, "I had no idea how late it was. The carriage must have been waiting ever so long. Don't come to the door with me, please. If the coachman saw us together, he would very likely tell the courier, who would tell papa, and then I should be cross-examined. Good-bye till we meet again at Seville; I will find some way to send you a note or a message there."

Sir Harry accepted his dismissal and fell back among the other visitors who were now trooping out of the building. He did not, however, lose sight of Sylvia; so that, on reaching the entrance, he perceived that there was nobody there to receive her and that she was looking about in perplexity.

"Haven't they sent for you?" he asked, stepping up to her side.

"Oh, they must have sent," she answered; "but I can see no sign of the carriage. I daresay the man got tired of waiting. Well, I must stay here till it pleases him to come back, that's all."

"You can't possibly stand about in this bitter cold," Sir Harry returned; for indeed one of those icy winds which render the climate of Madrid about the most dangerous in Europe had begun to sweep down from the Guadarramas and was driving clouds of dust before it.

Sylvia, who had omitted to provide herself with a wrap, shivered. "Then I will walk home," she said. "It is no great distance, and I can't mistake the way."

Sir Harry agreed that that was the best thing to do; only he would not hear of her walking through the streets of Madrid alone. In Spain ladies were never allowed to go out unattended, he declared, and he must insist upon seeing her safely as far as her hotel. There was really no danger in his doing so; for neither her father nor her aunt were in the least likely to have left the house in such weather.

Sylvia did not quite like it; still, of two evils the less seemed to be that she should take advantage of the escort offered her. She hurried her companion along at the top of her speed, being anxious to reduce the period of risk within as narrow limits as might be, and anxious also, if the truth must be told, to escape from the furious, piercing wind, which made conversation almost impossible.

Now it so happened that the coachman, who had been sent to fetch her, had some time before this experienced a similar natural anxiety. He had therefore driven back to the hotel to report the *senorita* was not at the Museo and to inquire whether she had returned home. Thus it came to pass that when Sir Harry and his charge arrived in the Puerta del Sol they ran full tilt against Muriel, who, on receipt of the above intelligence, had hastened downstairs and was in the act of entering the carriage to proceed in search of her missing niece. She was too much amazed and horrified to say a word; she could only stare interrogatively at Sylvia, who was also struck dumb by this most untoward encounter. But Sir Harry was neither confused nor greatly distressed. Being, as he had already stated, convinced that discovery was only a question of time, he was not sorry to be detected while there was still comparatively little to confess.

"You must try to forgive me, Miss Wentworth," said

he, smiling. "I met your niece in the picture-gallery, and as she was unable to find her carriage, I could do no less than offer to see her home. Of course I could neither leave her there standing in the cold nor let her walk back all by herself."

This was putting the case as well as it could be put; but the explanation failed to satisfy Muriel, who guessed from Sylvia's scared look that there must be more behind.

"You met her at the gallery?" she repeated, gravely. "Do you mean me to understand that you meeting her there was a mere accident? How is it that you are in Madrid at all?"

Thus challenged, Sir Harry spoke out plainly. "I am here because I heard that you were here," he replied. "You probably won't believe me, but it is nevertheless true that my only object in following you abroad was to obtain a chance glimpse of Sylvia, every now and then, from afar. I had no intention of speaking to her; but circumstances, as you see, have been too strong for me."

"I am not at all surprised at your having followed us, Sir Harry," returned Muriel, coldly—for indeed she did not believe his word and was highly incensed against him —"it is no more than I expected of you. I think you have behaved in a very unmanly and ungenerous way; but that also is only what might have been expected of you. I shall not make any appeal to you: it would be a waste of breath. All we can do to protect ourselves from this persecution is to prevent Sylvia from meeting you again."

With that she turned and left him, drawing her niece, whose arm she had taken, into the hotel with her.

It was about half an hour later that Mr. Wentworth, who had been dozing peacefully before the fire in his sitting-room, was aroused from slumber by his sister, who said in a determined voice: "James, we must leave this to-morrow."

"Must we?" he returned, with a yawn. "Well, if you say so, I suppose we must, though it will be very easy to go further and fare worse. But may I ask why we are to depart in such a desperate hurry?"

"Because Sir Harry Brewster is here, and because he met Sylvia by appointment at the picture-gallery this

afternoon. She has confessed that she made an appointment with him, although he led me to believe that they had met accidentally, and the worst of it is that neither he nor she are in the least ashamed. The only thing we can do is to start for Seville. No doubt he will follow us; but at least, now that we are forewarned, we can take care that he doesn't speak to Sylvia."

Mr. Wentworth was now wide awake, and when he had heard all that Muriel had to relate to him, he expressed his great surprise that Brewster should have been guilty of such ungentlemanlike conduct. "But I think," he added, "that we can checkmate our friend by means of a very simple stratagem. Of course he has been told that we are bound for Seville, and I shall give Sylvia to understand that that is our destination; only when we get to the railway station I shall make so bold as to change my mind and take tickets for Biarritz. How long we shall remain there after our return it will be for you to decide; but at all events we shall gain time by this little innocent manœuvre, and I am glad to think that Brewster will have the expense and fatigue of a fruitless journey. Meanwhile, if you send Sylvia to me, I will endeavor to give her the scolding that she deserves."

Mr. Wentworth was not quite the best man in the world at scolding. When he was put to personal inconvenience he was angry, and under such circumstances he could say disagreeable things; but, much as he disliked Biarritz, he thought that the appliances of civilization would be more readily obtainable there than at Seville; so that he was not seriously annoyed at being compelled to retrace his steps. Moreover, duplicity did not shock him particularly, and he was, in his own way, fond of his daughter. Therefore it was that Sylvia met with much more lenient treatment at her father's hands than she was entitled to expect.

He said that this sort of thing was really a great deal too bad. It was unladylike, it was improper, and it must not occur again. Indeed, he would take upon himself to assert that it should not occur again. He wished to hear no excuses and would be influenced by no arguments; he intended to leave for Seville on the following day, and

she would be so good as to make her arrangements accordingly.

Sylvia, who, as we know, had already made her arrangements, felt that nothing could become her so well as silent submission. She had got out of this awkward scrape far more easily than she had ventured to anticipate; she had not been asked to bind herself by any promise with regard to the future, and she inwardly resolved that it should be no fault of hers if she did not contrive to exchange a few words with her lover in one of the southern cities to which it had been signified to her that she was about to be removed. After all, Sir Harry had perhaps been right: fortune favors the audacious, and open war is in some respects preferable to the wiles of diplomacy.

Mr. Wentworth, however, had the laugh on his side when the train began to move out of the station on the morrow, and when he politely directed his daughter's attention to the fact that they were shaping their course due north.

"Merely a little measure of precaution," he remarked. "I feel persuaded that neither you nor Brewster can have contemplated coming across one another again in Andalusia; yet, since there seemed to be a chance of your doing so without thought or design—which would have been embarrassing for you both—I thought we might as well trot humbly back to Biarritz."

CHAPTER XIX.

It is a truism, and a somewhat melancholy one, that our minds lie at the mercy of our bodies, and that any trifle which may happen to throw the complicated organism wherein we are imprisoned here below out of gear has power to affect our hopes, our fears, our wishes and our anticipations to an extent against which there is little use in struggling. Sylvia Wentworth would doubtless have been a good deal more vexed and angry, on being informed of the trick which had been played upon her, had she not been preoccupied by the circumstances that she was in for a very bad cold. She had been chilled through and through on the previous day; symptoms with which everybody has good reasons to be acquainted were beginning to assert themselves; she felt as sincerely sorry for herself as everybody feels when suffering from the lassitude and heaviness which precede catarrh, and she also felt as sure as everybody feels at such times that she would obtain no sympathy from those about her. Under these depressing circumstances she could not distress herself very greatly at the thought that Sir Harry Brewster would scour Andalusia for her in vain; it was bad enough to have the prospect of a long night's journey before her. Sufficient unto that night was the evil thereof; it would be time to recur to other sources of sorrow when she should be in bed at Biarritz, with her nose swollen to twice its natural size and a mustard plaster upon her chest.

In the meantime, she conceived that she had every right to make herself disagreeable to her travelling companions, and she did so. She neither slept herself nor suffered her aunt to sleep. She knew, she said, that she was going to be very ill; not improbably she might die, and if she did, Muriel would have the satisfaction of knowing what had killed her. The night was cold, the rail-

way carriage was draughty; it was mere mockery to offer her lumps of sugar saturated with camphor. Anybody who had taken the trouble to look at her might have seen that she was not in a fit state to travel; but it was too late now, and all she asked was that she might be left alone.

As a matter of fact, she asked a good deal more. All her life she had been in the habit of exacting constant attention when she felt indisposed, and all her life that attention had been conceded to her as her due. Muriel bore patiently with her ill-temper now, feeling that it was excusable. A cold in the head is no such very grievous calamity, but a heartache is less easily cured, and, bad as Sylvia's conduct had been, some allowance had to be made for the fact that her heart was in all probability aching. She might be pardoned and pitied for imagining herself at the point of death, even though such a stretch of imagination might be intrinsically ridiculous.

The girl, however, was really ill, and when the return of daylight showed her flushed cheeks, her aunt became seriously uneasy about her. It was useless to say anything to Mr. Wentworth, who slept placidly until the frontier was reached and then averred that he had not closed his eyes; but it was now beyond a doubt that Sylvia was threatened with something worse than a mere cold, and the long delay and changes of carriage at Irun did her no good. On arriving at Biarritz she was in a high fever; insomuch that the first thing to be done was to get her to bed and send for the doctor. The servants, who had only a few hours before been warned by telegram of the return of the family, had omitted to light fires in the bedrooms; the house was miserably cold; the sheets were not properly aired; there was nothing except bread and butter to eat; and Mr. Wentworth, completely thrown off his balance by so comfortless a reception, swore that he could endure this sort of thing no longer. Come what might of it, he would start for England the very next day.

The doctor, who was soon upon the spot, and to whom after he had examined his patient, the above determination was expressed in vigorous language, answered rather

sharply that there could be no immediate question of a journey to England or anywhere else.

"Your daughter's condition is not at all satisfactory, Mr. Wentworth," said he. "I cannot tell yet what this will turn to; but both her pulse and her temperature are far higher than they ought to be, and you may depend upon it that, at the best, she will not be able to leave her bed for a week."

On the following day things were very much worse. The doctor then unhesitatingly pronounced the case to be one of congestion of the lungs. He must await further developments before stating whether this was or was not complicated by some kind of low fever; but there were indications which pointed that way. Meanwhile, he wished it to be understood that the young lady's state was critical.

"And she has no stamina—no stamina at all," he added, in the accusing sort of tone which doctors so often assume when making such announcements.

Muriel was in consternation; and so, to do him justice, was Mr. Wentworth. He would cheerfully have consented to forego his dinner for a month if by such a sacrifice he could have restored his daughter to health; and it would be impossible to describe the depth of his affections more forcibly than that. Sylvia herself was not frightened. At times she was light-headed, but when in possession of her senses she did not fear for her life. Her one idea was that this illness might be turned to good account, and she never wearied of imploring Muriel to send for Sir Harry Brewster.

"If I could only see him, I believe I should get well," she declared; "and if I am not to get well, what harm can my seeing him do?"

These representations might very likely have proved effectual—for Muriel, in her distress and alarm, was ready to consent to almost anything—but for the circumstance that Sir Harry's whereabouts could not possibly be ascertained. It seemed best, therefore, to reply with vague and soothing promises, of which the invalid did not fail to take note. She was backed up by the doctor, to whom she managed to convey a hint, and who said,

meaningly, that if his patient had any sort of mental worry or anxiety, nothing ought to stand in the way of its being removed.

Now, it so happened that Sir Harry, in defiance of all the laws of chance, had not taken his ticket for Seville. He was a man who seldom left more than he could help to chance; he had thought it extremely likely that a change of plans might be brought about by the events which have been narrated, and, as the result of certain inquiries, he had found out, not only that the Wentworths had quitted Madrid, but that they had departed by the night mail for France. That being so, what wiser course could he adopt than to follow their example? Personally he had no wish to visit the south of Spain; his only wish was to see Sylvia once more, and he was not sure that loyalty to her did not command him to gratify it. Mr. Wentworth, no doubt, would be justified in calling him by very ugly names if he should take up his quarters at Biarritz; but on the other hand, it had to be taken into consideration that he owed more to Sylvia than he did to Mr. Wentworth, and that if he went straight back to England, she might suspect him of having faint-heartedly abandoned her to her fate. As a sort of compromise, he finally decided to break his northward journey at Bayonne, where in all probability he would be able to obtain some news of her, without letting her relations know that he was in their neighborhood.

It is unnecessary to add that within twenty-four hours of his arrival at his destination he was a passenger by the little steam-tramway which connects Bayonne with Biarritz. There is a thirteenth-century Gothic Cathedral at Bayonne; but there is not much else to look at, and Sir Harry Brewster had never pretended to be a judge of architecture or to be interested in Cathedrals. It was simply out of the question for him to spend the whole day in loafing about the streets of a French country-town: moreover, it did not follow that by whiling away a few hours in the adjacent watering-place he must needs encounter any member of the Wentworth family.

He had not, however, progressed very far on his way from the railway station to the *plage* before he found

himself face to face with one of them. Muriel emerged from the chemist's shop, where she had been to leave a prescription, just as he passed the door, and he would have been greatly surprised had she confessed the truth, which was that the sight of him lifted a load of anxiety from her mind. She did not tell him that; but she paused, instead of passing on, as she might have been expected to do, and she interrupted without ceremony the halting apology upon which he embarked.

"I knew you would catch us up either here or elsewhere," she said, impatiently; "you did not make any secret of your intentions and I made none of my opinions about them. But all that is of no consequence now. You can stay at Biarritz if you choose, and you can search the whole place for Sylvia. You will not meet her, because she is in bed and dangerously ill."

Sir Harry started back. "Do you mean that," he asked, "or do you only say it to frighten me? Is it really true that her life is in danger?"

"The doctor thinks so. She was not well when we went to Madrid, and she caught cold that day when she met you at the gallery. I don't know whether I am wise in saying what I am going to say; but I dare not leave it unsaid. She is always asking for you; she declares that if she could see you she would get well, and it is just possible that that may be so. At any rate, I shall tell her that you are in the place, and if she grows worse, I will take the responsibility of sending for you upon myself. At which of the hotels are you staying?"

Sir Harry replied that he was staying at Bayonne, but that he would at once telegraph orders for his luggage to be sent on to the Hotel d'Angleterre. He added, with a touch of emotion which was evidently sincere: "You are very kind to me, Miss Wentworth. I know that I don't deserve your kindness; but I hope I may be able to show you some day that I am not quite so unworthy of it as you suppose."

"I have no wish to be kind to you," Muriel returned; "setting everything else aside, the fact must always remain that your wife is still alive, and nothing would ever reconcile me to an engagement between you and Sylvia.

I can't allow a chance of saving her life to slip through my fingers, that is all. Now I must go. If you don't hear from me, you will understand that she is better—in which case I could not be concerned in bringing you together."

"I fully understand that," answered Sir Harry humbly; "but I trust you will see no objection to my making inquiries at your door. After all, you cannot doubt that I love your niece, and you must be aware of what torture suspense will mean for me."

Muriel made the required concession, not over graciously, and, after answering some eager questions as to the nature of the disease and the condition of the sufferer, left him. As a matter of fact, she did not believe that this man loved Sylvia in any true or worthy sense; but she thought it probable that he cared enough for the girl to be made miserable by the absence of any tidings of her, and there was nothing to be gained by making him miserable. Let him come to the door as often as he pleased, if only he could be prevented from crossing the threshold!

But it is needless to say that such a prohibition was virtually impracticable. The thin end of the wedge had been inserted, and what followed was what invariably does follow, when once that initial difficulty has been overcome. Sylvia's joy on learning that her lover was within reach of her was only equalled by the persistency with which she pleaded that he might be admitted into the sick-room.

"Do you want to kill me?" she asked. "Well, you *will* kill me if you refuse to let me see him. You don't understand—you are too cold-hearted to understand how I long for him. All I ask is to be allowed to talk to him alone for a few minutes. Then, if I die, I shall at least have told him some things which he will remember after I am gone, and if I recover—why, all will remain as it was. You can't do any real good by inflicting this pain upon us both."

Many excellent reasons might have been given for turning a deaf ear to such entreaties; but it was not easy to state these or to resist pleas which were interrupted by

prolonged fits of coughing, Muriel knowing full well that she was beaten, could only take counsel with her brother, who proved himself no very valuable counsellor. Mr. Wentworth was distressed and unnerved; he heartily wished Sir Harry Brewster at the devil, and he said so; but he complained pettishly that he was being driven into a *cul-de-sac*.

"You are determined to throw the whole responsibility upon my shoulders," he remarked; "but what am I to do, I should like to know? You agree with me that the man is impossible and that Sylvia can never be allowed to marry him; yet you ask me to let her do a thing which you know as well as I must compromise her. It is a case of life or death, you say? Well, if you and the doctor will take upon yourselves to affirm that, I don't see how I can hold out against you. But I give in under protest—mind that!—and nothing will induce me to sanction an engagement."

The matter was debated a little further; the doctor was summoned and to some extent confided in; but the upshot of it all was that Sir Harry Brewster was sent for on the following day. It is true that by that time Sylvia was rather worse than better, and that excitement had had a prejudicial effect upon her; still it was with a heavy heart and with many misgivings that Muriel received him on his arrival. She did not offer him her hand; she merely went half-way down the stairs to meet him and then, turning round, beckoned to him to follow her. With her hand on the lock of the invalid's door she paused, saying:

"I will leave you alone with Sylvia for five minutes; she is too weak to talk any longer than that."

"Thank you very very, much," answered Sir Harry in a grateful whisper. "I give you my word of honor that I won't outstay my time."

"You will not be allowed to do so," returned Muriel, coldly.

But even while the words were upon her lips she was conscious that it was no longer in her power to decide what this man should or should not be allowed to do. He had won the battle, such as it had been; and when

he re-appeared—which he did with punctilious exactitude—the light of victory was in his eyes.

"She will recover, Miss Wentworth," he said, confidently, "I am certain of it, and so is she. She says she feels a different being now that——"

"Now that she has seen you?" asked Muriel, half angered, half softened—for indeed the man's face had somehow become transfigured by that brief interview, so that he looked almost boyish, and it was difficult to believe him guilty of anything worse than that selfishness which is the commonest of all human failings and which, unhappily, is so often equivalent in its results to villainy.

"Well—I suppose so," he answered, with a half-laugh. And then: "I'm afraid you will always hate and despise me, Miss Wentworth. What can I say? I ought not to be here; and yet my being here may perhaps have saved Sylvia's life."

"If that is so," returned Muriel, gravely and sadly, "we can only be thankful for your presence; but we cannot be thankful that it is so. When Sylvia is out of danger we shall have to begin thinking about her future and her happiness again, and I suppose we shall feel that we have not done our best for either by allowing you to meet."

Sir Harry had no rejoinder ready; nor in truth would it have been easy to dispute so patent a probability. Of course he came again on the ensuing day; it was no more possible to forbid that than to help rejoicing at the marked improvement which his advent had brought about in Sylvia's health.

"I feel as if I shouldn't much mind dying now," the girl declared; "but I am going to live, because I want to live."

She was in a sort of ecstasy, the cause of which could not but appear pitifully and pathetically inadequate to Muriel, but which nevertheless had to be recognized and dealt with. How it was to be dealt with was a question which hardly admitted of more than one answer.

"We have yielded," she felt constrained at last to say to her brother. "Rightly or wrongly, we have done

what we swore that we would not do, and now we must face the consequences. It is impossible that things can go on like this."

"Why is it impossible?" the head of the family inquired blandly.

"Because everybody in Biarritz will know, and very soon all our friends in London will know, that Sir Harry Brewster has been constantly with Sylvia since her illness. The only way in which we can excuse ourselves is to admit that they are engaged to be married."

"It does not surprise me to hear you say so," remarked Mr. Wentworth with a resigned air; "you are always in extremes. Personally, I prefer means—and Brewster, I suspect, has next to none. Not being disposed to support him out of my own—which, as you know are very modest—I cannot bestow my daughter upon him, even to stop the mouths of the gossips."

"You put your refusal upon the wrong ground," returned Muriel, impatiently. "When you say that you cannot bestow your daughter upon Sir Harry Brewster, you mean, I suppose, that you cannot bestow your daughter upon a man who has been divorced from his wife."

"Excuse me: I mean nothing more than what I say. For choice, one might prefer a son-in-law whose history had been a little less eventful; but fathers are seldom permitted to pick and choose. Under all the circumstances, I should be prepared to make the best of Brewster if he had a sufficient income. Since he has not, he will have to go, and we must put our trust in time and in Johnny Hill."

"Sylvia will never marry Johnny Hill," said Muriel, shaking her head.

"I am not so sure of that; still you may possibly be right. What then? The world is full of Johnny Hills, and we shall have to devote our energies to the discovery of another one."

Muriel sighed. It was useless to expect assistance from one who could not or would not believe that human life is anything but light comedy; she said what she had known all along that she would be forced to say, although she had cherished some faint hope of a respite.

"I can't let Sylvia die. In my heart and conscience I believe she will die if we separate her now from the man whom she loves; so, as your only objection is on the score of income, I will supply the income. I will settle two-thirds of what I possess upon her, and then they will be able to marry and be happy. At least, I hope they will be happy. If it is wrong for people who have been divorced to marry again—and I am afraid it is—then I must bear the blame. I can't let Sylvia die."

Mr. Wentworth clasped his hands behind his head and contemplated her, with a smile, through his half-closed eyelids. "The funny thing," he observed, "is that you really mean it. You would make this insane sacrifice; you know that it would be accepted; and unless I am greatly mistaken, you also know that it would no sooner be accomplished than you would begin to regret it. Now, do let me warn you, while it is still time, not to play these dangerous pranks with frail mortals. Sylvia and Brewster would take your money as soon as look at you; they would make conventional protests of course; but they would be very much disappointed if you listened to them. As for me, just consider for a moment what a temptation you are holding out to me. I don't share your scruples with regard to divorce; I don't believe Brewster to be very much worse than his neighbors; I am naturally anxious that your money shall find its way into her pocket, instead of swelling the resources of this Society of St. Francis or of some kindred association. But as I am not wholly devoid of principles, I must ask you to reflect upon what your position will be after you have despoiled yourself. A third of your present income will certainly not suffice to provide you with the comforts to which you have been accustomed, and you will be no richer at my death; for I need scarcely tell you that I have bequeathed everything to my daughter. Look again before you leap."

"I have looked," answered Muriel, "and I have come to the conclusion that the leap must be taken. It isn't the reasons which you mention that would have made me hesitate, and the true reasons, it seems to me, are overruled by sheer necessity. Mr. Compton told me how

it would be. I don't know whether he will admit me into the Society of St. Francis now; but if he won't, I shall be able to find some other way of occupying my time, and although I shall not be rich, I shall not be poor. Neither you nor Sylvia must imagine that the loss of money is any loss to me; I have always wished to get rid of it, and always intended to do so in one way or another."

Mr. Wentworth shrugged his shoulders. "*Liberavi animam meam*," he remarked; "it is no fault of mine if you refuse to listen to reason. You are a singularly foolish and impetuous person all the same."

CHAPTER XX.

WORDSWORTH—at any rate he says so—was often left mourning by the ingratitude of men and had only "heard" of "hearts unkind, kind deeds with coldness still returning." One would be sorry to accuse so admirable a person and so admired a poet of consciously writing claptrap; but it will be admitted that his experience must have been somewhat exceptional. The truth doubtless is that we ought not to expect gratitude, that if we look for payment in that coin our kind deeds cannot be called unselfish, and that when we fail to obtain it we are no more deserving of pity than anybody else who has made a bad bargain. Still we may as well, all of us, confess at once that we liked to be thanked, for this is a fallen world, and we are miserable sinners, and there is no health in us.

Mr. Wentworth proved himself a true prophet with regard to his daughter and Sir Harry Brewster. When Muriel's proposition was first broached to them they declared with one voice that they could not accept unhoped-for bliss at such a price; they were quite sure that it would be wrong to do so, and they begged her to say no more about it. But she persisted in saying more, and she made use of arguments which certainly did sound plausible, and in a very short time they grew accustomed to the idea. After all, why should they not take what she did not want, and what would otherwise be in all probability bestowed upon less-deserving members of the community? It must be assumed that she knew her own mind, and they could not but feel a sympathetic respect for the wishes of one who knew her own mind.

However, when it was all settled and the engagement

was an established fact, they might have been a little more amiable and a little more thankful. If Muriel did not say this to herself, the unformulated thought was present with her; and so it came to pass that another portion of her brother's forecast was to some extent verified. She did not regret her generosity, for she knew that, if it could have been recalled, she would have acted in the same way again; but she did deeply regret the necessity for it, and she felt, too, that it had not won her the love of its recipients. She should, of course, have been aware that love is not to be bought, and also that her gift had hardly been conferred with that good grace which alone can render gifts palatable. If she could not look cheerful about it—and this was beyond her—her reward must be found in the consciousness of having averted a great calamity by the substitution of a minor one.

But indeed it was not a matter of certainty that the great calamity had been averted. Sylvia, to be sure, had been tided over a crisis; she was now able to leave her bed, and, the weather having suddenly become warm, she could lie upon a sofa by the open window for several hours every day and enjoy the sunshine; yet her strength did not seem to return, nor would the doctor say more than that there was no longer any reason for immediate anxiety. She was perfectly happy, which was no doubt an important thing; only Muriel saw what neither Mr. Wentworth nor Sir Harry would see, that the high spirits which kept up her vitality during the day were always followed by a physical reaction towards evening, and that she was not getting the repose which is so essential to convalescence. Her nights, too, were disturbed and restless.

One afternoon when Sir Harry had at last been induced to take his leave, after having sat talking to Sylvia for two hours, Muriel followed him out of the room, and said:

"Do you know what I should like you to do? I should like you to be summoned to England on business and to go away for a week or ten days. At this rate, Sylvia will never get well. I don't think you realize how weak

she is, or what harm it does her to over-exert herself."

Sir Harry pulled a long face. "I am willing to do anything that may hasten Sylvia's recovery," he replied, "but I daresay you will forgive me for doubting whether my departure would produce that effect. In any case, I can't go back to England, because, to tell you the honest truth, I am afraid I might have some disagreeable encounters with the writers if I did. I might go to Paris, of course; still I really don't think I ought, unless Sylvia gives her full consent. My own belief is that she is growing stronger every day; but even if I am mistaken, you will agree with me that it can only do her harm to be distressed. And I have the vanity to feel convinced that my going away would distress her."

Muriel did not attempt to argue the point. For a short time she had almost liked the man and had tried to believe in him; but now she had reverted to her original conviction of his worthlessness, and that incidental admission of his with regard to his debts did not shock her as it might have done a week earlier. She took for sheer impudence what was in truth a manifestation of the candor which was his redeeming virtue, and she let him go withour further words.

It remained to try what could be done by means of an appeal to Sylvia; but she was not sanguine as to the results of such an appeal, nor was she suprised by its complete failure.

"What do you mean, Muriel?" asked the girl starting up from her reclining posture as soon as she saw the drift of the suggestion which was delicately conveyed to her. "Why do you want me to send Harry away? Do you think you can part us now? Oh, you can't be so cruel and so wicked!"

"I am not so foolish, at all events," answered Muriel, smiling. "There is no question of your being parted for more than a week or so; but you yourself must know that you are not advancing as you ought to be, and that his being here for such a long time every day is keeping you back. For the matter of that, he won't go unless you ask him to go; he has just me told so."

"Then," said Sylvia, sinking back upon her pillows

again, "he will stay. I couldn't ask him to go even if my life depended on it. I shouldn't dare! So long as he is here, he is mine, and I have no fears; but if he were to leave me—oh, how can one tell what dreadful things may not happen! Men are not like us; generally it is out of sight out of mind with them, and—and—well, I don't know whether the joy of seeing him and talking to him does me harm; but I know that it would do me a thousand times more harm to be continually fretting during his absence."

"Do you trust him so little?" asked Muriel, sadly.

"Oh I don't deny that it is shameful to distrust him; but I am ill, and I can't always drive away the horrid thoughts that come into my mind. Do you remember that day when Colonel Medhurst met Harry and made a scene? I thought at the time that I didn't care a bit whether what he said was true or not; everybody commits sins, and everybody is supposed to be forgiven if he repents of them. But now, when I am lying awake at night, the thought of that woman haunts me. I say to myself, 'He must have been in love with her once; but he tired of her, and why shouldn't he tire of you?' It isn't as if I had anything to give him except a rather pretty face, and my face won't be pretty for long; it looks quite drawn and ugly even now in the mornings. I don't know why I am speaking to you in this way. Does it disgust you?"

Muriel shook her head, but could make no articulate reply. Her eyes were full of tears and her heart of pity. Alas! the poor child's apprehensions were only too well founded; it was impossible to refute them, yet it would be worse than useless to express concurrence in them. There was nothing for it but to keep silence, and this was the more easy since she could not trust herself to speak.

But Sylvia, who read her thoughts, began to laugh and said: "There! you needn't look so dismal about it; it is all nonsense. When I am in my sober senses I am as sure of Harry as I am of myself; I only let you into the secret of my nightmares so that you might understand why I can't send him away from me. Besides," she

added in a graver voice, "I am not sure that I can afford to lose him even for a day. Yesterday I asked the doctor suddenly whether I should ever be well again, and I saw by his face what he thought, though he pretended to laugh at me. Last night I felt as if I was dying. Antoinette was dozing in her chair, and I was very nearly waking her and sending for you; but the feeling passed off and I fell asleep. Well, if I do die, I daresay I shall have had as much happiness as most people; and perhaps if I live—but we won't talk any more about it. I am going to bed now; and please, Muriel, don't ask Harry to leave me again, because indeed I couldn't bear it!"

Muriel could but give the required promise. Sir Harry would not go at her bidding, nor did she any longer think it desirable that he should do so. From that moment she lost all hope of her niece's restoration to health.

Many days passed without much apparent change; but she saw that the girl was slowly sinking, and the doctor, while declining to commit himself to any positive opinion, saw it also. "I told you from the first, my dear lady, that she had no stamina," he said.

Only Sir Harry and Mr. Wentworth remained blind; because they were both of them men who possessed the power of ignoring painful possibilities. What Sylvia herself thought it was difficult to tell. After the conversation recorded above she did not again refer to her condition, and Muriel had not the heart to say anything to her about it. A time must come, and would probably come soon, when all affectation of ignorance would have to be cast aside.

But that dreaded day never came. One evening Muriel had, as usual, left the invalid, who had fallen asleep, and was herself preparing to go to bed, when Antoinette, the French maid, rushed into the room without knocking.

"Venez, Mademoiselle, venez vite!" the woman gasped; "je crois qu'elle est morte!"

Muriel was scarcely frightened at first: Sylvia had had more than one fainting-fit of late, and that her inexperienced attendant should have mistaken unconsciousness for death was not surprising. Antoinette, however, was not mistaken, and when Muriel had hurried to the bedside,

the evidence of her own senses soon convinced her that there was no room for doubt or hope. It was terrible, it was incredible; but it was true. Without a word of farewell, without, so far as could be known, any presentiment that her end was so near, the girl had passed quietly away in her sleep; she, her joys and her troubles had ceased to belong to this world, and never again would she be a source of anxiety to those who loved her.

Well, it was more than probable that, as she herself had said, she had had her share of earthly happiness; death is not the worst enemy of mankind, nor is life our best friend; and since we all must die sooner or later, those who die painlessly in their youth should perhaps be esteemed fortunate. But these consolatory reflections are of general rather than of particular application, and Muriel had to pass through a long period of sorrow and self-reproach (though there was little enough occasion for the latter) before she was able to admit them.

CHAPTER XXI.

MURIEL, as has been said, had been in some measure prepared for Sylvia's death; she had, at any rate, known there was little or no prospect of ultimate recovery. But upon Sir Harry and upon Mr. Wentworth the blow fell like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, and they were completely stunned by it. Of the two, the former, when he regained possession of his senses, suffered perhaps the most. His love may not have been, and probably was not, worth much; the chances are that it would have burnt itself out in due season and that he would have treated his second wife no better than he had treated many other women before her. But naturally he did not take that view of his case, and his self-pity was, to say the least of it, excusable. He had made such excellent resolutions; he had been so fully determined to turn over a new leaf and begin a different kind of life! Now everything was at an end; his dream was one which would have to be put away and forgotten, like other dreams; he had lost—at least he told himself so in his despair—all that rendered existence of any value to him. It would be doing him an injustice to say that he mourned over the loss of the fortune which his bride was to have brought with her as her marriage-portion; yet that loss was a serious fact which stared him in the face when he tried to look forward into the future, and to which he could not altogether close his eyes.

His connection with the Wentworth family was perforce terminated. Mr. Wentworth had only accepted him under protest, and because there had seemed to be no help for it; Muriel had always detested him; and, as a matter of fact, both of them begged to be excused from seeing him until after the funeral. He had of

course a right to be present at that sad ceremony, and he was present; but as soon as it had been concluded and the earth had been shovelled on to the wreaths which covered poor Sylvia's coffin, he felt that there was nothing to detain him any longer at Biarritz.

"I suppose we shall be strangers henceforth, Miss Wentworth," he said, at the end of the brief farewell interview which Muriel accorded to him; "everything connected with my name must be painful to you, and I don't wonder at it. But, although I dare not thank you in my own name, I may be allowed to say that I shall never forget your goodness and generosity to Sylvia; and I think, after a time, it will be a comfort to you to remember that you were the means of making her last days happy."

Thus he made a fairly graceful exit, and since he will not appear again in these pages, it may be mentioned here that his subsequent career, so far as it has gone, has not been marked by any scandalous episodes. Apparently he has overcome his financial difficulties; for he is to be seen in London and at Newmarket, and, as he has not ceased to be a first-rate shot, he is invited to many country houses during the winter months, although Morecambe Priory is not one of them. One may surmise that in a heart toughened by varied experiences a soft corner remains sacred to the memory of Sylvia Wentworth, and one may also, by a stretch of charity, go so far as to believe that some of the good resolutions with which Sylvia was instrumental in inspiring its owner have been fulfilled; but men of Sir Harry Brewster's stamp do not brood over their sorrows; otherwise their faces would not remain smooth while those of so many of their juniors are scored by indelible lines.

As for Mr. Wentworth, his grief, while it lasted, was deep and sincere. It was, of course, selfish, like every other emotion that he experienced. His feeling, if he did not express it in so many words, was that he had been very cruelly treated. He had been a most indulgent parent; he had refused his daughter nothing; he had consented to her marriage with a man of whom he could not approve, upon the understanding that the pecuniary

sacrifice which such a marriage must entail was to be borne by somebody else; and this was his reward! His child was taken from him; his sister was sure either to marry or to devote herself and her means to some insane scheme for ameliorating the condition of the lower classes; he saw before him the prospect of a lonely and objectless old age. It was very, very hard; and Muriel, who should have been sympathizing with him and trying to comfort him, would only hold her tongue and look heart-broken.

Muriel looked as she felt, and although she was sorry for her brother, she could not attempt to console him after any fashion which he would be likely to consider appropriate. She knew him well enough to know that in his case time would prove a certain and speedy anodyne, and perhaps this knowledge, combined with her own preoccupation and unhappiness, rendered her somewhat less attentive to his creature comforts than had been her wont. He was by way of being too bowed down by the weight of his affliction to care what food was set before him; but he could not help caring, and when, after Muriel and he had returned to their melancholy home in London, the cook took advantage of relaxed supervision to send up dinners which were far below the mark in point of refinement, he assumed the air of an uncomplaining martyr.

It was indeed a melancholy home that these two bereaved persons were doomed to inhabit. They had little to say to any one another; they only met at meal times; visitors were not admitted, and at first Mr. Wentworth doubted whether he ought to go to his club. At the expiration of a week he granted himself that trifling concession, feeling that flesh and blood could no longer endure a system of solitary confinement; but Muriel sat all day long in the silent drawing-room, where a hundred trifles kept reminding her of her loss, and had not the heart to go out of doors. She would not even seek out Mr. Compton, much though she longed to confide all her sorrows to him. She knew instinctively that he would understand her, that he would not be hard upon her in this hour of her despair, that he would condone

the weakness which he had predicted and from which, after all, no evil consequences had resulted; yet she could not summon up courage to take the risk of a rebuff. He must have heard the news of Sylvia's death; in all probability he had heard of her previous betrothal to Sir Harry Brewster; if, then, he felt any pity for one whose intentions at least had been good and upon whom a heavy visitation had fallen, he would surely find time to call at Upper Brook Street. In fact she so fully expected him to call that she gave instructions for his admission in the event of his presenting himself.

As, however, he failed to put in an appearance, she was forced to the conclusion that he felt no pity for her. Well he had never shown himself very compassionate; perhaps, clever though he was, he could not quite enter into a woman's feelings. It had been clever of him to lay his finger upon the weak spot in her character; yet he might have divined that there is a species of strength belonging to that particular species of weakness and that just because she could not bear to see others unhappy, she was capable of devoting herself heart and soul to such a work as he had in hand. Being thus defrauded of sympathy from a quarter to which she had looked for it with more confidence than she had been aware of, her thoughts not unnaturally turned towards one who had once told her that she was essential to his happiness and had furthermore implored her to let him know if at any time he could be of service to her. Her occupations and her troubles had not caused her to forget Colonel Medhurst; she had often thought of him, she had often accused herself of having behaved badly to him, she had more than once longed for the sight of his honest face and the sound of his voice, and certainly it was in his power to render her a service now at no greater expense of time and convenience than might be implied in finding his way to her house. But such favors cannot be asked for; they ought to suggest themselves to persons of ordinary intelligence. Moreover it had to be borne in mind that Colonel Medhurst was not the man to look leniently upon such a surrender as that to which she had been driven. Sylvia was dead; but

Sylvia, if she had lived, would have become the bride of the villain who had wrecked his sister's life, and he might not unreasonably hold Muriel answerable for an abomination which had only been averted in that tragic way. Upon the whole, the chances seemed to be that his friendship, like that of Mr. Compton, had been fruitlessly sacrificed.

He cleared himself in some measure of that unmerited suspicion by a letter written from Colchester, which was delivered to Miss Wentworth one morning, and which was not much more infelicitously worded than letters of condolence usually are. What disappointed and vexed Muriel was that it was a letter of condolence, pure and simple. Anybody and everybody, writing to her at such a time, might have made use of commonplaces which he appeared to consider adequate. He would have set them down on paper earlier, he said, but he had shrunk from intruding upon her and had also been kept busy by troubles of his own which, although not to be compared with hers in magnitude, had left him little leisure for correspondence. He was sure, however, that she would not attribute his silence to indifference—and so forth.

It was easy enough to read between the lines and to guess at the nature of the troubles alluded to. His sister, no doubt, had been horrified by the intelligence that the man who had once been her husband was about to contract a second matrimonial alliance; she would have said some hard things about the Wentworth family, which Colonel Medhurst was in no position to contradict. Nay, he must have shared her indignation and disgust; for how was he to know anything about the cruel dilemma in which the Wentworth family had been placed? He might, to be sure, have been wise enough and charitable enough to understand that one member of that family would not have given way without reasons of overwhelming cogency for so doing; but, when all is said and done, wisdom and charity are no such every-day qualities, and since Muriel did not intend to marry Colonel Medhurst, it was perhaps a matter for congratulation that he had been thus summarily and effectually cured of a vain attachment.

That he had been cured was quite evident. She read his letter through again from beginning to end, and was more than ever struck by its cold and constrained tone. No lover could possibly have written so formally, nor could he have felt any doubt as to the sense in which his composition would be interpreted. Indeed, he had evidently been at some pains to make his meaning unmistakable. "You are not what I took you for," he seemed to say. "Of course, under the circumstances of your bereavement, I cannot openly upbraid you; but I wish you to know that you have lost both my love and my esteem."

Now there are very few women in the world, or men either, who can endure to have that kind of thing said to them. Most of us, knowing full well that we deserve all the love and esteem we are ever likely to get, would be made exceedingly angry by such a statement; but Muriel, who was in a deplorably low condition of mind, was only moved to tears by the thought that her best friend had turned his back upon her. She did not blame him; his conduct was—at all events ostensibly—justified by hers, and perhaps, if no allowances were to be made, she might be said to have fairly forfeited the friendship which he had been so kind as to offer her. But she pitied herself very much, and she realized for the first time what a heavy penalty was implied in the payment of that forfeit. She had always been lonely. Now she was absolutely and utterly alone: nothing remained to her save the intermediate companionship of James and the pleasing duty of ordering James's dinner for him every day.

But who can tell when the turning in the long lane of misfortune has been reached? Muriel had begun to devote her attention once more to cookery-books—since that appeared to be her sole mission in life—when one evening, not long after this, Mr. Wentworth entered the drawing-room with a smile of suppressed amusement upon his lips which seemed designed to provoke inquiry. It produced that effect after a minute or two, and elicited a prompt reply.

"You want to know what I am laughing at?" said he. "Well, I will tell you; because it is really funny, and I

hope it will make you laugh too, though I notice that you have rather lost the trick of laughter lately."

"Neither you nor I have much reason to feel merry," observed Muriel, with a shade of reproach in her voice.

"My dear girl, sorrows are sorrows and jokes are jokes, We are so constituted that both appeal to our sensibilities, and why should we pretend that we can't laugh through our tears, when the phenomenon is one of daily occurrence? Permit me to indulge my humble little joke, and don't be so foolish as to accuse yourself of heartlessness if it tickles you. What should you think of me in the character of a blushing bridegroom, for instance?"

If this was a joke, it was not a very successful one. Muriel had never lost sight of the possibility that her brother might marry again; but that he should contemplate such a step just now amazed her and, to tell the truth, shocked her into the bargain. She said something more or less appropriate and gravely inquired the name of her future sister-in-law.

"Ah," answered Mr. Wentworth, leaning back in his chair and nursing his leg, "this is where the comic part of the business comes in. I should like to make you guess; but you look so forbidding that perhaps I had better hurry the point and secure my reward of cheers and laughter without more delay. The name of the lovely and accomplished being who has deigned to bestow herself upon me is—Mrs. Hill."

Muriel was so taken aback that she could only stare incredulously. Her first impression was, that her brother was amusing himself by talking nonsense; but on scrutinizing him more closely, she thought she could detect a certain shame-facedness beneath his assumption of jocularity. "I don't know what to say, James," was all the reply that she could make, after a prolonged pause. "You have always cited Mrs. Hill as an example of everything that is vulgar and ridiculous; but I suppose that you must be serious and that you are telling me the truth."

"I am certainly telling you the truth," answered Mr. Wentworth; "as for my being serious you will preceive that the subject is not one which lends itself very readily

to serious treatment. Mrs. Hill is, of course, ridiculous, and she may also be vulgar, although I do not remember calling her so; but she is good-natured, she has plenty of money, and I am convinced that she will take the greatest care of me. Moreover she will provide me with constant diversion. Far be it from me to utter a word of complaint against you, my dear Muriel; but you must acknowledge that home has not been made particularly diverting for me of late. And I really cannot live without diversion in some form or other."

It was impossible to feel very angry with one who was so candidly selfish. "You have a right to please yourself, James," began Muriel hesitatingly, "and now there is no need for you to consider anyone except yourself. But—but Mrs. Hill, of all people!"

"Oh, she is rather old and rather fat, and she lies open to hostile criticism in a great many respects. She possesses, however, the solid merits which I have enumerated. I understand the significance of the reproof which you convey so delicately when you tell me that I am not now called upon to consider anyone except myself; but in all sincerity, don't you think I have as much consideration for you as you have for me? I am not asking you to live in the house with Mrs. Hill; I know you wouldn't do such a thing; but then I also know that you won't live much longer in a house with me. Nothing seems to me more certain than that you will either marry or join some eccentric society before the year is out. Now isn't it a fact that your eyes have already begun to turn longingly towards your friend Compton?"

The retort was fair enough. There are more ways than one of displaying selfishness, and Muriel could not but acknowledge to herself that if Mr. Compton had offered, at any time since her return home, to receive her into the Society of St. Francis, she would have been sorely tempted to abandon her brother to his fate. She did not answer his question, but somewhat hastily disclaimed any intention of reproving him; and so, after a few more words, the conversation ended.

Later in the evening she was able to derive some comfort from the thought that she was at all events eman-

cipated by this change in her prospects. Mr. Compton might continue to disbelieve in her vocation; but he could no longer represent to her that her duties began and ended at home. She was about to be deprived of her home; she would have to provide herself with a fresh one; she was not sufficiently advanced in age to live alone, and surely she was entitled, if ever any woman was, to claim the refuge afforded by the association of which he was the head. Since he did not choose to come to her, she would go to him; she would lay her case before him, begging him to disregard all preconceived notions that he might have formed respecting her, and to treat her as what she was—an individual without family ties and with a certain amount of money which she was anxious to expend in furthering the objects that he advocated. In common justice and consistency he could scarcely dismiss her. Being thus firmly resolved as to her course, she went to bed in comparatively good spirits and slept more soundly than she had done for a long time past.

CHAPTER XXII.

One goes to bed in one frame of mind and one wakes up in another. This is a matter of universal experience, which has its conspicuous advantages as well as its drawbacks, although there is certainly something rather humbling to human pride in being thus at the mercy of physical conditions. When Muriel Wentworth awoke, her first thoughts naturally turned to the disclosure which had been made to her on the previous evening, and she found that she could not let them dwell upon her future sister-in-law without feelings of shame and disgust. James was going to disgrace himself; no other term than disgrace would fit such an alliance prompted by such motives; and she felt that the egotistic light in which she had viewed his project had led her to acquiesce in it far too readily. Remonstrances might not, it was true, have been of much avail; still she ought at least to have tried the effect of them; perhaps also she was, to some extent, responsible for his decision in favor of desperate remedies. Undoubtedly she had paid very little attention to his comfort of late, still less had she attempted to divert him; and, as he himself had pathetically avowed, he was a man who could not exist without diversion. Well, it was not yet too late to amend; she would apologize for her past shortcomings, she would endeavor to do better for the future, and she would promise him that, if he would abandon an idea which was really preposterous, his home should henceforth be made more cheerful for him.

Animated by these excellent sentiments, she went downstairs to breakfast, and her exposition of them had at any rate the effect of procuring Mr. Wentworth some immediate diversion.

"If I understand you rightly," said he, when she had finished, "you suggest nothing less heinous than that I should jilt the confiding creature who is at this moment under the impression that she is my affianced bride. You mean well, I am sure; but I must own that I am surprised at your heartlessness."

"Won't you speak seriously just for a few minutes, James?" pleaded Muriel. "Mrs. Hill may have been very silly to accept your offer——"

"Thank you, my dear," interjected Mr. Wentworth, with a little bow.

"But she can't be so silly as to mind much if you tell her that you have thought better of it. Of course she knows what prompted you to make it—I daresay you didn't disguise your motives—and she must see that it is for her own happiness, as well as yours, that she should release you. Besides, she has a grown-up son to think of."

"Liberal pecuniary arrangements will be made on Johnny's behalf," answered Mr. Wentworth, composedly. "He is already amply provided for, and on his mother's death he will inherit very nearly as much as he would have inherited if she had remained in a condition of forlorn widowhood. We fully considered the case of Johnny; for I assure you we are most considerate people. We considered your case too; and Arabella—have I mentioned before that Mrs. Hill's Christian name is Arabella?—quite agreed with me that we should be doing you a positive service by leaving you free to follow your own devices. As I told you yesterday, my dear Muriel, I am acquainted with your devices. I don't pretend to know which of them will finally commend itself to you; but I will make so bold as to predict that before sunset you will have interviewed the Father Superior of the Society of St. Francis, and submitted a tempting proposition to him."

"Whether I do or not will depend entirely upon you," Muriel declared. "I don't deny—why should I?—that I think of asking Mr. Compton to provide me with a home and an occupation; but you can give me a very good reason for not doing so, if you like."

"I could give you half a dozen good reasons for not doing so; only you know, as well as I do, that you wouldn't listen to them. As for the special reason to which you allude, I must beg you to excuse me. My mind is made up, my word has been pledged; and, in addition to that, I really shouldn't feel justified in afflicting you with the scruples of conscience which would inevitably assail you hereafter. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the Society of St. Francis would, in process of time, lose the attractions which it has for you at present, there would still remain the possibility of your meeting somebody worthy to be your husband, and then the recollection that you had deprived me of a snug haven for my old age might deter you from marrying that worthy man. In such an event I should be quite inconsolable."

Mr. Wentworth spoke, as usual, in ironical accents; but there was a good deal of common sense in what he said. If he was to resign Mrs. Hill's companionship, as well as her money, at his sister's bidding, Muriel, on her side, could evidently do no less than give up her life to him, and she was not unnaturally staggered for a moment when this obligation was made manifest to her.

"You see now," he remarked, smilingly, "that I am like the donkey in the fable, and that, since I am bent upon jumping over the precipice, you will only fatigue yourself unnecessarily by hanging on to my tail. Allow me to take my leap, and I will allow you to take yours. We are both of us donkeys, no doubt; but we are so simple and innocent that Providence may perhaps interfere on our behalf and protect us from broken bones. Now go and see Mr. Compton."

Muriel went without much further ado. She, at any rate, could not restrain her brother from taking his proposed leap, and it might be hoped that Mr. Compton would be equally unsuccessful in her own case. It was with a beating heart that she sought admittance into the familiar building wherein she hoped ere long to take up her permanent abode, and she paced restlessly up and down the waiting-room until the arbiter of her des-

tinies, who, fortunately, was at home, made his appearance.

"Mahomet has had to come to the mountain, you see," she said, rather tremulously, as she took his outstretched hand. "I thought you would have found your way to Upper Brook Street; why didn't you? Was it because you felt that you couldn't speak to me without condemning me, and because you thought it would be cruel to add to my sorrow? But don't you understand that remaining away was just as bad? It is better to be rebuked than to be contemptuously left alone. Besides—who knows?—I might have had a word or two to say in self-defence."

"I don't know what you mean," he replied; "what have I to rebuke you for? I heard of your great trouble, and if I had had the slightest idea that you were in London, I would of course have gone to you upon the chance of your consenting to receive me; but I supposed that you were still abroad."

Muriel drew a breath of relief. "Well, I am glad," she said; "though perhaps it is rather too soon to be glad. You know nothing at all, then?—you don't know that before my poor Sylvia died she was engaged to be married to Sir Harry Brewster, with her father's consent and mine? You don't know that it was all my doing? Because at last the question came to be one of money, and I gave in and undertook to provide the money—just as you said I should."

He shook his head. "There was a rumor of the engagement; some lady or other mentioned it to me, but she gave no particulars, and I could not tell whether her information was accurate or not." He added, after a moment, "It is very sad for you; still, I suppose that the poor girl's last days were made happier for her through you, and it must be some consolation to you to remember that. Probably it was because you saw her health giving way that you acted as you did."

"Yes, indeed, it was that and nothing else," answered Muriel, eagerly. "How did you guess?—but you guess everything! I don't really believe that I should have yielded if she had been strong and well; but she was

dying before my eyes, and the doctor said she must be relieved from mental distress, and Sir Harry Brewster, who had followed us abroad, was in the place. We could not refuse to let them meet, and when once that concession had been made, the rest followed almost of necessity. James was ready to consent to the engagement, if only the money difficulty could be overcome; and so the responsibility fell upon me. I suppose I was wrong; but I should do it again. It was to save her life—and, after all, it did not save her life!"

At this point Muriel's self-control suddenly deserted her, and she began to cry. She was furious with herself for being so silly, which naturally made her cry all the more; but indeed her emotion did not injure her in the esteem of the experienced practitioner with whom she had to do. Compton was unlike the generality of men, who are frightened or irritated by a woman's tears; in the course of his daily work he had to witness many similar manifestations of sensibility, and he knew exactly how to deal with them. He knew so well how to deal with Miss Wentworth that in a very few minutes she had choked down her sobs and was smiling upon him gratefully. She had never realized before how kind and gentle he could be; she had never supposed him capable of entering into all her feelings as he did. He did not affect to think that she had been right in promoting a marriage which, according to his ideas and hers, would have been no marriage; but he admitted without hesitation that if he had been in her place he would probably have behaved as she had done.

"I have never been exposed to so strong a temptation in my life," said he; "but I have been exposed to many less strong, and I have yielded to them. So you see that I am in no position to condemn you. Well, it has been in vain; and now you don't know what to do with your life and your money. Isn't that what you came here to say?"

"I came here to offer them to you," answered Muriel. "Are you going to drive me away a second time?"

And as Compton smiled and drummed upon the table with a dubious air, she went on: "You can't urge what

you urged before; Sylvia is gone, and my brother is going to marry again; he told me about it this morning. Very soon I shall be as completely alone in the world as it is possible to be, and if you repudiate me now, your only reason must be that you distrust me personally."

She spoke with some vehemence, feeling that her position was a strong one; and that much Compton freely admitted, after he had asked a question or two with reference to the betrothal of Mr. Wentworth and Mrs. Hill.

"I have perhaps no right to go on throwing cold water upon you," he said at length, "and it is very true that you are no longer situated as you were when you first applied to me. Nevertheless, I won't disguise from you that I have misgivings. It would be useless, and possibly also unkind, to tell you what some of them are; but I will repeat one which I mentioned to you at the outset. I don't like enlisting heiresses in our service. If you were twenty years older, or if you could dispose of the bulk of your fortune before joining us, my difficulty would be a good deal lessened."

"I can't make myself twenty years older," answered Muriel; "but as for disposing of my money, that is a very simple affair; one can always get rid of money. Only I can't quite understand why you should wish me to do so. James has plenty and Mrs. Hill has more than plenty; so that it would be absurd to offer it to them. Consequently, if you won't take it, it will have to be distributed amongst hospitals and other charitable institutions. Surely the Society of St. Francis has as good a claim as another."

"No doubt; but the Society of St. Francis will not benefit by laying itself open to charges of greed and undue influence, and so forth. However, I am aware that these objections will scarcely hold water, and the objections which might hold water are—well, I don't quite see my way to insisting upon them. You shall take at least another week for consideration, though. I will ask you, during that time, to peruse our rules carefully and to think over each of them. You will see that they are in many respects very stringent, that they call

upon you to make a complete sacrifice of your individual will and that when once you have given up your allegiance, you will practically have cut yourself off from all possibility of retreat. For example, we cannot, and we must not, restore any sum of money which may have been legally transferred to us, and every member of the Society is required to place his or her worldly goods in the common fund. We do not permit experiments, you see."

"Of course I know that," answered Muriel. "I will wait another week or another month, if you wish it; but you may be perfectly certain that neither weeks nor months nor years would make me change my mind. When you know me a little better you will acknowledge, I hope, that I am not a very changeable person."

Mr. Compton laughed a little, but abstained from any rejoinder. Presently he remarked, after consulting his watch, that his time was up.

"If," he added, as he escorted his visitor down to the corridor, "you should wish to see me again before you take the final step, and if you should think that I could help you in any way, you will send for me, I hope."

"Yes," she answered, "I will; but I don't know that there is much more to be said. You have taken an immense load off my mind, and I am very grateful to you."

Then, while he was in the act of taking leave of her, she summoned up courage to make a request which she had been wanting to make for a quarter of an hour past. "Colonel Medhurst is a friend of yours, is he not?" she asked, with a slightly heightened color.

"Well, yes; I daresay I may venture to call him so, though we seldom meet now-a-days."

"He is a friend of mine too," Muriel went on somewhat hurriedly. "At least he was a friend of mine, and—and I like him very much, and I don't wish him to think worse of me than he can help. I am afraid he has been hurt and displeased by what he has heard about our poor Sylvia's engagement to Sir Harry Brewster—of course it is only natural that he should be—and, if it were possible, I should like him to know how and why it was that

we gave our consent. Perhaps you might have an opportunity of telling him."

Compton fixed those piercing eyes of his for an instant upon her, but immediately lowered them again. "Would not your best plan be to write to Medhurst?" he suggested.

"I shall write to him, because he wrote to me the other day; but I don't think I can very well say what I should like to say. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse*, and he wrote quite kindly, without alluding to the subject that he was evidently thinking of. Only his letter was cold, and I could see that he meant it to be cold."

Compton opened his lips, as if he were going to say something, and then apparently thought better of it. "I think I understand," he replied, "and I will take care that Medhurst shall know the truth. You are probably mistaken in imagining that he is displeased with you; still the point is one which can be easily settled. For my own part, I should fancy him a man who is remarkably steadfast in his friendships."

Muriel expressed her thanks and went away with a light heart. Mr. Compton, she felt sure, would represent matters in such a light that Colonel Medhurst would be able to remember her without bitterness. To all intents and purposes she was about to die, and doubtless he and others who had known her, would forget her as speedily as the dead are always forgotten; yet it is natural and human to desire that, on bidding farewell to the world, one should leave no enemies nor any disenchanted friends behind.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHAT can be said to an old woman who proposes to make an old fool of herself? The obvious answer is, nothing; and silence, no doubt, is as appropriate to such a case as it is to a hundred others—the only misfortune being that it is seldom possible for us to keep silence under circumstances which render silence desirable. It was, for instance, absolutely necessary that Muriel should say something to Mrs. Hill, and the mere fact that she could not think what to say did not relieve her of the obligation. Shortly after her interview with Mr. Compton, therefore, she set forth to call upon the bride-elect, hoping against hope that some happy inspiration might come to her in the hour of need.

She was so far fortunate as to obtain a respite, for Mrs. Hill was not at home; but just as she was turning to leave the house, she almost ran against Mrs. Hill's only son, who, with heavy clouds upon his brow and a latch-key in his hand, was ascending the steps.

"Oh, is that you, Miss Wentworth?" said Johnny, taking off his hat. "I was thinking of looking you up: only I was told that I shouldn't be admited if I did. Won't you come in for a few minutes? My mother won't be back much before dinner time, I expect."

"But that is why I am going away," answered Muriel, smiling. "I came here to see your mother."

"Oh, yes, I know," returned Johnny gloomily; "you had to come; but you didn't want to see her—of course you didn't. And I'll tell you another thing: she doesn't want to see you. She is in mortal dread of you, as well she may be! Now I *do* want to see you very badly, and it would be awfully kind of you if you would spare me a

quarter of an hour. You're the only person in the world whom I can speak to about—about things that have made me uncommonly miserable."

He really looked miserable and his artless appeal was hard to resist; so Muriel allowed him to conduct her into the house, although she did not see how she was to relieve his distress unless it might be by reminding him that his mother's marriage would probably be the means of insuring him a rather larger share of liberty than he had hitherto enjoyed. Indeed, his case did not strike her as being a particularly deplorable one, except in so far as every man must deplore an act of folly on his mother's part.

But it was not of his mother or her folly that Johnny began to speak when he had led the way into the gaudily furnished drawing-room which was the pride of Mrs. Hill's eyes. His recognition of Muriel as one upon whose sympathy he might rely was based, apparently, on other grounds; and in truth his grief at the cruel blow which she and he had sustained was expressed so simply and unaffectedly that she felt for the first time how unjust had been the good-natured contempt with which she had hitherto regarded the poor fellow.

"I know she didn't care a straw for me," he said; "I don't suppose she ever would have cared. Still, while there's life there's hope, and what I used to say to myself was that sooner or later she was bound to find Brewster out. Because, you know, Brewster *is* a bad lot. His best friends—and somehow or other he seems to have kept plenty of friends—don't attempt to deny that."

"If she had found him out, it would have been too late," answered Muriel. "I think, as you do, that she must have found him out in the long run; but I am thankful now that she was not robbed of her illusion. And I am sure, too, that you would not have wished her to be undeceived before she died. You can't have disliked or feared Sir Harry more than I did; yet I could see nothing for it but to make the best of him."

"Oh, I know how you must have felt about it," said Johnny, with a sigh; "I expect I should have done just what you did. Only I should always have hoped that the

engagement might be broken off. I suppose she was awfully fond of him, wasn't she?"

"Yes, it was an infatuation; I doubt whether anything would have cured it. It is possible, though I don't think it is at all likely, that he might have done something which would have led her to break off the engagement, and it is also possible that she might then have consented to marry you out of anger and disappointment. But no man should wish to be accepted upon such terms."

Muriel believed this cruel candor to be the best remedy that she had it in her power to employ: besides which, her statement had the merit of being true. But perhaps she somewhat under-estimated the strength of calf-love.

"I daresay you are right," Johnny replied; "but there are lots of things that one oughtn't to wish for and does wish for. All I know is that I would have married Sylvia upon any terms. Well, it's all over now, and she'll never know how much I loved her. And I don't believe anybody cares, except you and I."

"Perhaps nobody else cares quite as much," agreed Muriel. "I didn't know that you——" she paused for a moment and then, perceiving that he must guess how she had intended to end her sentence, went on: "To tell you the truth, I always imagined that it was rather your mother's wish than yours that a match should be arranged between you and Sylvia."

Johnny nodded gravely. "So it was, at first," he acknowledged, "and I shouldn't wonder if that was what knocked any little chance that I might ever have had upon the head. My mother, you see, has taken up the idea that I am a prize and that nine girls out of ten would be only too delighted if I were to propose to them. Of course that's all bosh, and her behaving as if I had nothing to do but to throw the handkerchief has often made me look like a bigger fool than I am—which is saying something. All the same, it's a fact that lots of girls would marry a drivelling idiot if he had a few thousands a year of his own, and my mother knows that. My mother," added Johnny, with comical solemnity, "is

a woman of the world, and an uncommonly shrewd woman too."

Muriel managed to abstain from laughing; but it was physically impossible to prevent her eyebrows from raising themselves and the corners of her mouth from dropping slightly.

"Ah," observed Johnny, noticing these signs of dissent, "you think she hasn't shown much shrewdness or knowledge of the world by her last move; but, mind you, I'm not so sure of that. Mr. Wentworth, you see, knows a heap of people whom she doesn't know and would like to know. When she is married to him she will have mounted a step or two on the ladder. That's my opinion; and I know it's hers, because she told me so."

"Then all I can say is that I think she ought to have been ashamed to tell you so," rejoined Muriel, warmly.

"That's another matter. For my own part, I must confess that I shouldn't have thought the game was worth the candle; but she wasn't bound to consult me, and she didn't. I have nothing to complain of, except that it's rather a bore to be cast adrift. Because I don't quite see the fun of living in the house with a step-father."

"It is no great hardship to be one's own master," remarked Muriel.

"Well, that depends: some fellows are accustomed to taking care of themselves and others aren't. I'm sure *I* don't know what's going to become of me, and I don't particularly care either. I think I shall go out to Colorado or some such place and start a ranch; anything would be better than hanging on here without a solitary object to live for."

Muriel thought he was a good deal more likely to marry and settle down as a staid paterfamilias; but she was not so unkind as to put her thought into words. She confined herself to observing that it is, after all, less embarrassing for a man to be cast adrift than for a woman.

"Oh, you don't propose to live with them, then?" said Johnny.

"I haven't been invited to do so; but if I had, I should have declined the invitation. For a long time past I have wished to join a religious order called the Society of St. Francis, of which you may have heard me speak, and now there will be nothing to prevent me from doing as I wish. So long as James required me to keep house for him I felt doubtful about leaving home; so that in one sense his marriage may be called an advantage for me."

"H'm! I shouldn't call it exactly that, but I suppose you know best," observed Johnny, to whom it appeared that Miss Wentworth was being driven to make a sad surrender of the destiny marked out by Providence for handsome young women.

Perhaps it was a half-conscious association of ideas that prompted him to say, after a long interval of silence, during which his companion's attention had wandered far away from him: "Of course you've heard about Colonel Medhurst."

"No; I have heard nothing," answered Muriel, with re-awakened interest. "Is he going to be married?"

Johnny broke into a short laugh. "Not that I'm aware of; *everybody* isn't going to be married. No, poor beggar! he's had worse luck than that—lost all his money. It seems that he invested everything in a coffee plantation in Ceylon, and now the whole thing has gone to smash, and his agent has bolted. It's hard lines upon a man of Medhurst's age to get such a facer, and the worst of it is that he'll have to resign the command of his regiment, they say, because he can't very well live upon his pay in an expensive corps like that. It's just one of those cases that make a useless beggar like me, who has more coin than he knows what to do with, wish it wasn't out of the question to hand over a few thousands to a friend."

"Oh, but Colonel Medhurst is hardly a friend of yours," said Muriel, with an odd feeling of jealousy at the expression of the generous wish.

"Well, it wouldn't make any difference if he were; the only way in which one can give a friend money is by leaving him a legacy and dropping down dead."

Muriel wondered whether that was, after all, a perfectly accurate statement of facts. Certainly a gift of money cannot be offered to any one except an indigent relative; but is death so absolutely essential to the payment of a legacy? Take the case of a lady who is about to cut herself off from the world, and who, before doing so, must dispose of her fortune—a lady, moreover, whose fortune is held to be a positive drawback by those to whom she contemplates affiliating herself: surely a will made by her previous to her retirement would be much the same thing as a will made by a dying person, and those who might benefit under it would not need to feel any scruples of conscience. The more she thought about it the more determined she became to carry out the idea which had occurred to her, and it was little that she heard of Johnny Hill's conversation during the remainder of her visit.

As she walked away, her mind was full of the unmerited misfortunes which had fallen upon this brave soldier and worthy gentleman. The wreck of his sister's life had, she knew, been a sore trial to him; he had been disappointed—for one must assume that it had been rather a disappointment—in the woman whom he had loved; and now, at a time of life when fresh departures are no longer possible, he was reduced to poverty, and was in danger of being forced to abandon his profession. Well, if she could in some measure atone for the share which she had had in causing his trouble, if she could set him upon his legs again before she finally took leave of him, she would be able at least to look back upon one good deed in the course of an otherwise unsatisfactory career. The only awkward circumstance was that it would be necessary to obtain his consent, which was not likely to be accorded without hesitation; for although she would soon be as good as dead, these things have to be explained before they become evident to the ordinary mind, and it would be scarcely safe to execute a transfer in Colonel Medhurst's favor without saying a word to him about it. At length, therefore, she decided to write and request that he would be so kind as to call upon her when he should next be in London. She would then reason

with him and, she hoped, persuade him that he would be doing nobody the slightest wrong by accepting what she must in any case resign. She abstained from giving any hint of her intentions in her letter; she merely said that she was very anxious to see him, and that she trusted that her wish might soon be gratified. "Because I hardly know how much longer I shall be here. My brother is going to be married to Mrs. Hill, whom I think you have met in this house, and his marriage will mean the breaking up of our present establishment."

Colonel Medhurst replied with military promptitude. He could quite easily run up to London for a day, he wrote, and he would make a point of doing so. He hoped to be with her soon after three o'clock on the following afternoon, and unless he received a telegram to the contrary, he should take it for granted that that hour would be convenient to her. He was sorry to hear that she was to be put to the trouble of making a fresh home for herself, although, under the circumstances, that was doubtless unavoidable.

Muriel was not a little daunted by the formality of this missive. Obviously he still harbored feelings of resentment against her, and it would be no easy matter to get him to accept a pecuniary gift from one whom there was only too much reason to fear that he despised. Still the attempt must be made, and perhaps he might think a little better of her when he should have heard what she had to say for herself. It was just possible, too, that Mr. Compton might already have communicated with him.

Meanwhile, she had to make a part of her plans known to her brother, who received the intelligence with a shrug of his shoulders and with the remark that it did not come upon him as a startling surprise.

"I don't think you wise," he said; "but then you don't think *me* wise; so it's even. If people are not always the best judges of their own affairs, they always think they are—which frees their friends from the painful and useless task of opposing them. I congratulate the Reverend Superior of the order of St. What's-his-name, who has secured a big fish without any unseemly exertions. When do you propose to take the veil, if I may ask?"

"I thought of waiting until after your marriage: as soon as that is over I should like to begin my new life. But please do not talk as if I were going to enter a convent, James. There is nothing conventual about the Society of St. Francis, except that we take vows of poverty and obedience, and I shall be able to see you from time to time, if you wish it."

"We shall always be charmed to welcome you," replied Mr. Wentworth, "and we shall not detain you very long from taking your vows, whatever they may be; for our wedding is to take place in about a month's time. You see, we are so young and romantic that we really cannot brook any unnecessary delay."

CHAPTER XXIV.

It was not without considerable trepidation that Muriel entered the drawing-room at the appointed hour and sat down to await Colonel Medhurst's arrival; for now that the time had come for her to put her proposition into plain words, she could not help perceiving how utterly at variance it was with all conventional notions of propriety. As, however, her imagination had enabled her to foretell pretty clearly what Colonel Medhurst would say, she had the requisite rejoinders quite ready for him; moreover, since she knew what was coming, while he did not, she thought it would not be difficult to lead up to her point after a fashion which should land her in the stronger position at the decisive moment.

Exactly as the clock struck half-past three he was announced, and although he held himself erect and stepped forward with a smile upon his lips, she could not but feel a sudden shock of surprise and pity when she noticed how greatly his appearance had altered since their last meeting. He had become thin and gaunt; the lines upon his brow and cheeks had deepened, and about his temples some gray hairs which had not been there before were distinctly visible. Thus it was that the conversation was not opened in precise accordance with the programme which she had mentally drawn up, for, instead of greeting him with kindly but distant civility, she exclaimed involuntarily, "How ill you look!"

"Do I?" he answered. "I can't account for that except by advancing years and rather more than my fair share of worries. I am one of those fortunate people who are never out of health."

"I know you have had many worries of late," said

Muriel, recovering herself, and reverting to the line of attack upon which she had originally decided, "and I am afraid you consider me answerable for some of them. That was one of my reasons for begging you to come and see me; there are things which can be explained so much more easily by word of mouth than by letter. Of course I know that you would have come without waiting to be asked if you had not been offended with me, and of course you could not help being offended and—and disgusted when you heard of our poor Sylvia's engagement to Sir Harry Brewster; still I do hope that after I have told you what the circumstances were——"

"I assure you," broke in Medhurst eagerly, "that that was not my reason for remaining away. I had other reasons, which I would rather not mention unless you insist upon it; but I don't think they were very good ones. I can't tell you how sorry I am that you should have thought me unjust enough to be offended with you for permitting what you could not prevent. I guessed at once what the true state of the case must be, and there was no occasion for Compton's letter, though I am grateful to you for having asked him to write to me."

"I asked him to say a few words to you when he had an opportunity," answered Muriel; "I did not know that he would write at once. What did he tell you?"

Not, apparently, that Miss Wentworth was a candidate for admission into the Society of St. Francis; for, had he done so, Colonel Medhurst would doubtless have made some allusion to that fact. As it was, he looked slightly embarrassed, and hesitated for a second or two before replying that Compton's letter had been rather a long one.

"He wrote to me partly about my own affairs, which have been giving me some trouble and anxiety during the last few weeks, and then he mentioned having seen you. He gave me to understand that you were afraid of my having done you the injustice that you spoke about just now, and that you wished me to know what had induced you to consent to an engagement which you could not have liked. But, as I told you, it was quite unnecessary to offer me explanations. I should have had no right

to blame you in any event, and most certainly I never dreamt of blaming you. I should have been worse than stupid if I had imagined that you gave way to anything short of sheer necessity."

"It is a great relief to me to hear you say so," Muriel declared; "I don't think there are many men who would say so in your place. It did seem to me to be a matter of sheer necessity that I should do anything I possibly could to prolong Sylvia's life; but I didn't expect you to think so; I only hoped that, if you knew the truth, you would make some allowance for me."

Medhurst repeated what he had said before and spoke kindly of the unfortunate girl, whom in his heart he esteemed fortunate, inasmuch as death had preserved her from becoming the wife of so hopeless a rascal as Sir Harry Brewster. He was very friendly and sympathetic; yet it was evident that he was not altogether at his ease, and Muriel wondered why. It was only when she introduced the subject of her brother's approaching marriage that he pricked up his ears and began to look more like himself.

"And what will you do now?" he asked, quickly. "I gathered from what you said in your note that you don't mean to go on living with Mr. Wentworth."

"Oh, no; that would be an impossible arrangement. I have made one which will suit me better in every way. Mr. Compton has at last taken compassion upon me, and I am to be admitted into the Society of St. Francis immediately after James's wedding."

Colonel Medhurst frowned at his boots and said he was very sorry to hear it—very sorry indeed. He had half feared that her wishes might turn in that direction, but had been reassured by Compton's silence upon the subject. "It is a sad mistake, Miss Wentworth, and I should be no friend of yours if I didn't do my utmost to prevent you from committing it."

He was going to add more, but she held up her hand to stop him. "It would be a mere waste of breath to reason with me," she said. "In all conscience, time enough has been given to me now for reflection, and if I am going to make a sad mistake I am going to make it.

Even Mr. Compton has at last been brought to admit that a wilful woman must have her way; his only remaining objection to me is that I am too rich. He is afraid that he will be accused of having kidnapped an heiress."

Colonel Medhurst grunted. "H'm! that is all very fine; but I suspect that he will submit to having your money forced upon him. Otherwise you might set his mind at ease by bestowing it upon some deserving person unconnected with the Society."

"Quite so," agreed Muriel, composedly; "and indeed that is just what I intend to do. Something I must give to the Society of St. Francis; I do not wish to throw myself upon their charity, nor, I think, would it be quite honest to do so; but as for three-fourths of my fortune, I can only say that anybody who would kindly relieve me of that amount would do me a real service."

"Oh, you will have no difficulty in meeting with some one willing to oblige you," returned Colonel Medhurst, sardonically. "Upon my word, this is about the craziest proceeding I ever heard of in all my life!"

"I am not so sure of that," said Muriel, declining to notice his final ejaculation. "No doubt the crossing-sweeper at the corner of Grosvenor Square would consent to be enriched at my expense; but I could not take the responsibitity of enriching a crossing-sweeper. I must make a rather happier selection than that, unless I wish to have the ruin of a fellow-creature upon my conscience. You see, it is simply a question of making my will, and it happens, oddly enough, that there is no human being who has the shadow of a claim upon my benevolence. I have lost Sylvia; James, who has a sufficient income of his own, is going to marry a wealthy woman, and I have no poor relations. Now, will you for one moment dismiss me from your mind and try to picture yourself in my situation? You have been told, we will say, that you have only another month to live; you have a large sum of money at your disposal, you have made no will, and it is your manifest duty to make one. In the absence of a single needy relative, where are you going to look for an heir?"

Medhurst laughed, and said that it was not very easy to imagine himself in such a dilemma, but that he supposed a man in that position of perplexity could not go very far wrong by helping the London hospitals.

"Well, perhaps he wouldn't and perhaps he would. I have been told, by people who ought to know, that the managment of some of the London hospitals is not so satisfactory as to deserve blind confidence. However, we will put it that you don't fancy the idea of leaving all you possess to charities—that you would much prefer bequeathing it to some individual."

"Oh, in that case, I suppose I should make choice of one or other of my old brother-officers. Unfortunately, I could name a good many who have families growing up, and who are pinched for means."

"Exactly! You would leave your money to a friend; and that is what I want to do. Do you remember once telling me that you wished to remain my friend? Well, now you have an opportunity of proving to me that you were sincere. I know perfectly well what you will say: you can't accept my money, because I am not going to die. But this much, you must remember, is certain—I am bound to rid myself of my money by some means or other before I can take a vow of poverty, and if nobody else will receive it from me, Mr. Compton—who would rather be without it—must. As far as the money is concerned, I *am* going to die."

Colonel Medhurst shook his head. "I do hope you will not set me down as ungrateful," said he; "but it isn't the same thing. Your having thought of me is a sign of friendship and good-will which I shall always remember and always be proud of; only—what you ask me to do is impossible. No man who had a shadow of self-respect could do it."

"Why not? But never mind!—I will allow, if you like, that a woman who has taken a vow of poverty is not quite the same thing as a dead woman, though the distinction is in reality an imaginary one. I will go further than that and allow that my handing over this money to you will create a good deal of gossip. Your friends will call it a queer story, and all sorts of nonsense

will be invented and repeated about it for a time. Well, can't you submit to that for the sake of doing me a great kindness? You mentioned just now that your affairs had been causing you anxiety latterly, and I heard from Johnny Hill how unfortunate you had been. He even said that you might be obliged to give up the command of your regiment. Was that true?"

"Yes; but——"

"One moment!" interrupted Muriel. "Before you make up your mind to refuse what can hardly be called a gift, seeing that I only ask you to take what I can't keep, just consider whether it is fair, either to yourself or to me, to be so punctilious. Have you any right to give up your profession and condemn yourself to inactivity while you are still in the prime of life? And isn't your friendship for me rather a nominal sort of sentiment if you decline to do me the only favor that I have ever asked of you, or ever shall?"

Colonel Medhurst rose, walked to the other end of the room and back again, and then said: "I am very sorry; I wish I could oblige you. I think there is a good deal of force in what you say; it is quite true that, if you join this Society—but I still hope you may change your mind about that—you will be dead to the world and that somebody must inherit your fortune. I may be prejudiced and illogical; I daresay I am; all I can tell you is that I could no more accept your money than I could marry a rich woman because she was rich."

"That is a totally different case. It is disgraceful to marry a woman for the sake of her wealth; but I suppose that if you cared for her you would consent to marry her, notwithstanding her riches; and surely if you had any friendly feeling for me, you would consent to grant my petition, notwithstanding the fact that by doing so you might lay yourself open to a few impertinent or disagreeable remarks. For, when all is said, that is the worst that can come of it."

"I think," said Medhurst, after reflecting for a moment, "I had better tell you something. Very likely it may make you laugh at me; but I must chance that, because I want to make you understand how I feel about

these things. I confess that when I heard of the trouble that had come upon you, I formed certain selfish hopes. Of course I didn't know that there was any prospect of Mr. Wentworth's marrying again; but I knew that you and he had not much in common, and that your life with him would be a lonely and rather unhappy one. So then I thought that as soon as you returned to England I would see you and—and, in short, try my luck a second time. In spite of himself, a man who has given his whole heart to a woman can't help fancying that his love must count for something; I am making no apology for myself, I am only stating the facts. Well, do you know what it was that prevented me from carrying out my intentions? Why, simply that in the meantime all my modest savings had gone by the board, and that it seemed to me out of the question for a pauper to offer marriage to a lady of your wealth. The pauper had no reason to be alarmed, you will say. Probably not; still I couldn't quite trust myself. I wasn't sure that I should be able to see you without telling you once more that I loved you, and that was why I determined not to see you at all. Now do you understand?"

"I understand that you are full of false pride," answered Muriel. "By your own admission, you thought only of yourself, and you would have broken the heart of a woman who cared for you rather than submit to the humiliation of sharing her income. In other words, you care a deal more for yourself than you do for me."

Medhurst laughed. "You shall not put me in the wrong in that way," said he. "Since I am making a clean breast of it, I may as well own that my hopes, such as they were, were grounded upon your loneliness. If I had been a young man, and if it had been possible for you to love me as I love you, I don't think I should have allowed my pride to keep us apart."

"And perhaps if I were an old woman you wouldn't feel so many scruples about taking the legacy which I have done my best to force upon you."

"I can't say: no doubt it would have been easier to accept it in that case. But, you see, you are not an old woman."

"I didn't choose the date of my birth, and it seems

rather hard that I should be punished for not having come into the world forty years sooner; but I suppose it is use-and less to argue with you, since you are so wrong-headed and obstinate. Well—good-bye, then."

Colonel Medhurst endeavored to prove that it was neither through lack of love nor lack of friendship that he was compelled to disappoint her; but his representations met with little attention, and no response beyond a slight smile; so that it only remained for him to retire sorrowfully. He had not reached the door, however, when Muriel, with a sudden movement, overtook him and laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"You are resolved to humble me to the very dust!" she exclaimed, with something between a laugh and a sob. "Anybody but you would have guessed—although it is the simple, honest truth that I did not know it myself until a few minutes ago."

He stared at her in blank amazement. "You did not know what?" he faltered, stupidly.

"Must I put everything into such very plain language? Well, then, I did not know that I loved you. There!—it only remains for you to say that you spoke too hastily just now, and that you can't see your way to marrying a woman who is better off as regards money than you are."

But Colonel Medhurst, as may well be supposed, did not say that. What he did say, and how Muriel answered him, and after what fashion the next half-hour was spent—these are details which the imagination of most readers will be equal to the effort of filling up. The earth spins round the sun and the seasons succeed one another with unvarying monotony; nations and generations fade away and are forgotten; men and women are born, reach their prime, pass it and die; everything is old and everything new. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* One does not particularly care about looking on at love scenes, which to be sure, are apt to appear slightly idiotic to everybody except the persons immediately concerned. Muriel had no fear of appearing idiotic to Colonel Medhurst; but it did occur to her, after a time, to dread the scorn of one individual whose esteem she valued.

"I don't know how I shall ever find the courage to tell

Mr. Compton of this!" she sighed. "From the first he has suspected that I was a humbug, and now he will be sure of it."

But Colonel Medhurst said: "Compton is no fool. I don't mind telling you now that I made a confession to him some time ago, and when he wrote to me the other day, he urged me very strongly to ask you once more to be my wife. As you know, I didn't take his advice; I couldn't believe that he understood you better than I did. But now I am very thankful to acknowledge that he knew what he was talking about, and, if you like, we'll go and see him together and eat humble pie. You may depend upon it that he won't consider our news bad news."

This confident prediction was justified by the event; for when, on the following day, Mr. Compton received a couple of visitors of whom one was a good deal shame-faced, while the other was calmly triumphant, he had nothing but sincere congratulations to offer them. However, Muriel drove him into a corner by asking him point-blank whether he didn't think hers a very untrustworthy disposition.

"I think," he replied, "that you won't go very far wrong if you treat it as such. You took up an idea, and you clung to it, I must own, with curious consistency for a considerable length of time; but it was never anything more than an idea, which wouldn't have come into your head at all if Medhurst had turned up a month or two earlier than he did. You won't allow that? Well, I will be more magnanimous. I will allow that, if you had joined us, you would most likely have worked as well as eighty per cent. of our recruits do. Only you wouldn't have been happy, whereas now, I hope, you are going to be happy."

Everything seems to point to the probability that she will. Colonel and Mrs. Medhurst are still a newly married pair, so that their future must for the present remain a matter of conjecture; but as selfishness is not a vice which can be laid to the charge of either of them, conjecture has in their case the best of all grounds for being sanguine. It is not given to the majority of mortals to

look with Compton's clear vision upon the world and society and the chaos which must inevitably result in universal upheaval, and for us, who belong to the majority, it is doubtless a blessing to be a little short-sighted. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof: there is always the cheering possibility that our mundane career, with all its responsibilities, perplexities and trivialities, may terminate to-morrow.

THE END.

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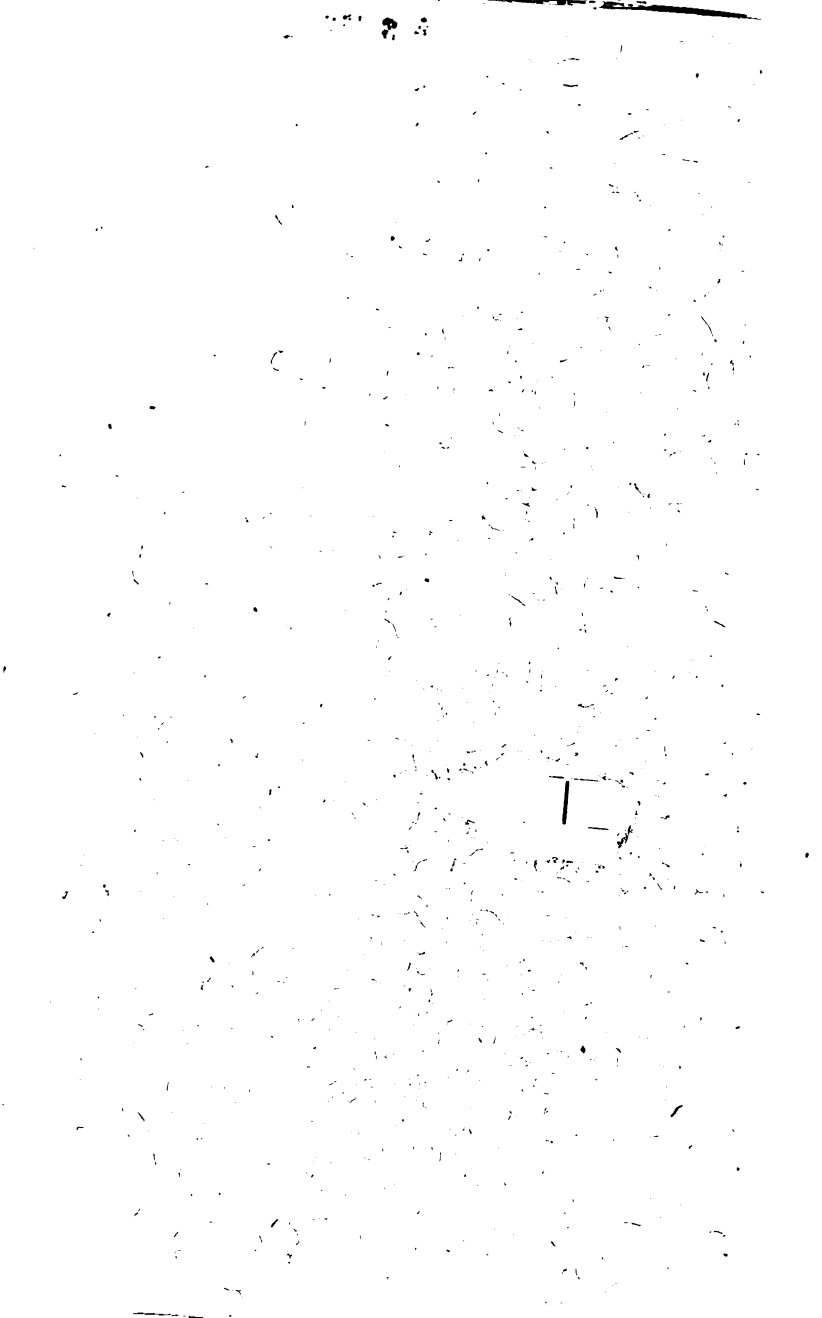

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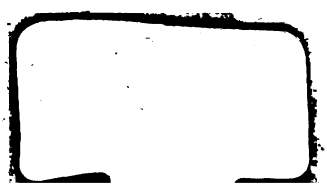

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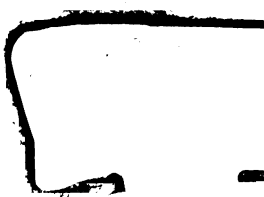

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